The World of Musical Theatre from the West End to Broadway and beyond

MUSICALS

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Charlie Stemp

From Crazy for You to Kiss Me, Kate, why this triple threat is drawn to Golden Age classics

Plus!

That's so fetch! The allure of Mean Girls and the varsity musical

Live show reviews

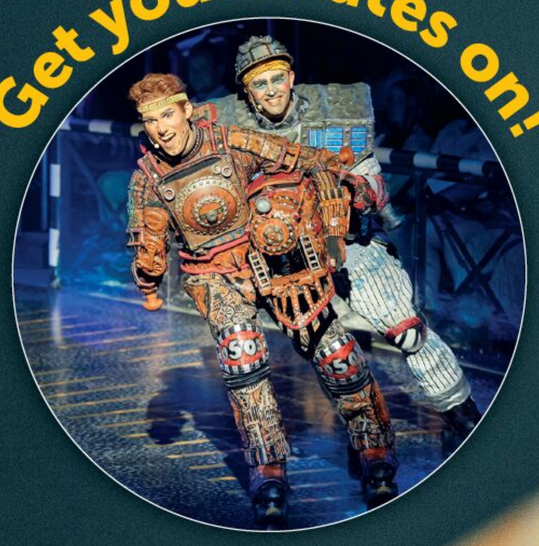
Including
MJ the Musical, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and The Outsiders

Recording reviews

Including
Water for Elephants, White Girl in Danger and 42 Balloons

Elaine Paige revels in the sheer decadence of Cabaret

Get your skates on!



How the London revival of Starlight Express aims to enthral a new generation

Live show listings

West End, Broadway, regional, touring and international

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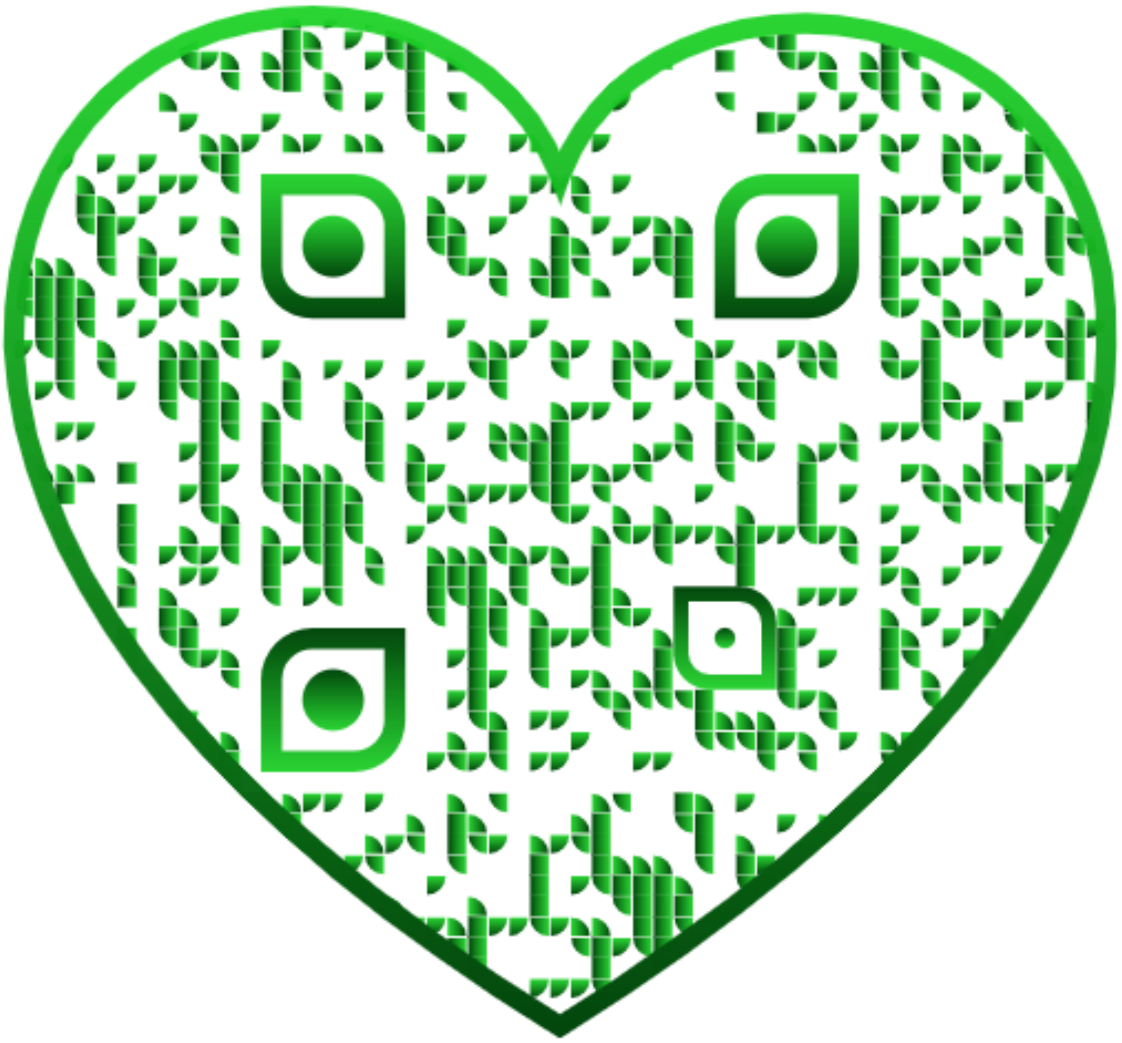

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The future is bright for new grassroots musicals

For our launch issue in October 2022, I had the pleasure of writing a feature on nurturing the next generation of Musical Theatre writers. During the course of my research, I spoke to representatives from UK- and US-based organisations, from Mercury Musical Developments (MMD) and Musical Theatre Network (MTN) in London to the National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT) in New York, as well as smaller set-ups – and a whole new world opened up to me: a world where creators spend years honing their craft (often while holding down other jobs), never knowing if their work will reach an audience.

So it's thrilling that, in recent months, some of these grassroots projects have not only come to fruition but have truly been allowed to shine. Take *Operation Mincemeat* from creators SpitLip. For my 2022 feature, I spoke to Matthew Eames at The Lowry, who told me how he'd given this 'little show that's perfectly beautiful' a platform at his Rewrites Festival; an excerpt was subsequently presented at BEAM 2018 (co-produced by MMD and MTN), whereupon investors came on board. It subsequently had runs at three London fringe venues (the New Diorama, Southwark Playhouse and Riverside Studios), before transferring to the West End in 2023 where it's still running. Plus, it took the Best New Musical Olivier this April. It really was a David-and-Goliath-style triumph – a fact not lost on the creators, who were visibly overcome as they came up onstage.

But it doesn't stop there. This issue, we review *42 Balloons*, which has just finished its premiere run at The Lowry following three concerts in 2022. The producers include Andy and Wendy Barnes, who helped propel Marlow and Moss's *SIX* to its current dizzy heights, and the charity Perfect Pitch, dedicated to developing British musicals.

Surely this isn't the last we'll hear of this 1980s-set musical based on the true story of a truck driver flying in a helium-balloon-propelled chair above LA…

It's certainly not the last we'll hear of composer Jack Godfrey, whose musical *Babies* is soon to run at The Other Palace. Serendipitously, this musical began its life when Godfrey and book writer Martha Geelan submitted a song to British Youth Music Theatre (BYMT) for its New Music Theatre Award; BYMT was another organisation I spoke to in 2022, when director Emily Gray told me: 'Our mission is to give the writers space to make their show the best it can be.'

And then there's Jim Barne and Kit Buchan's *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)*. It was called *The Season* when it showcased at BEAM 2018 (what a year that was for BEAM!), and now it's landed at the Criterion Theatre. This gorgeous two-hander, performed by Sam Tutty and Dujonna Gift, is another example of, to quote Eames, 'a little show that's perfectly beautiful'.

When I spoke to Bronté Barbé and Rebekah Hinds of *Kathy & Stella Solve a Murder!* for a recent podcast, they were in awe at the success of this musical comedy by Jon Brittain and Matthew Floyd Jones which, like *SIX*, began life at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. With it now coming to the Ambassadors Theatre for a short run (it makes way for Darren Clark and Jethro Compton's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, another success story!), the pair advocated fringe theatre as well as big, celebrity-led shows because 'it can grow into something special'.

There's space, then, for both. Which is why, this issue, we've chosen the fabulous Charlie Stemp as our cover star, to talk about his role in the Golden Age classic *Kiss Me, Kate*. Inspired by the upcoming premiere of *Mean Girls*, we also explore the trend in campus musicals. And, in a trip down memory lane, I delve into the origins of *Starlight Express*, as a new version comes to Wembley.

Funnily enough, I opened my first-ever editorial with a nod to that very show, and how it kickstarted a life-long love of musicals. At that point, we didn't know what the future would hold for *Musicals* but, buoyed by the launch issue's success, we became a regular bi-monthly publication, and now I'm delighted to reveal that, from October, we'll become a monthly magazine! And all of this is down to you, our loyal readers – for which I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Sarah.

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INTRODUCING THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS...

Chris Bartlett is a freelance arts journalist and scriptwriter who has been reviewing theatre since the late 1990s. He has written for and worked as a sub-editor for publications including The Stage, Musical Theatre Review, Heat, New Woman and Radio Times. He is currently an Assistant Commissioner for the Radio 4 podcasts and digital team. You can read his review of 42 Balloons on page 46.

Lisa Martland is a writer and editor who began her career with a decade on staff at The Stage newspaper as critic, chief sub-editor and deputy editor. She is the founder/publisher of one of the UK's top theatre websites, Musical Theatre Review, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. Lisa is also a reviewer and sub-editor for Musicals Magazine. Read her review of Opening Night on page 50.

Linda Winer was chief theatre critic and arts columnist of Newsday from 1987 to 2017. She taught critical writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts and hosted the 'Women in Theatre' series on CUNY-TV. She has judged the Pulitzer Prize for Drama 10 times, five times as panel chair. Read her review of Illinoise on page 54 and her double review of Lempicka and Suffs on page 56.

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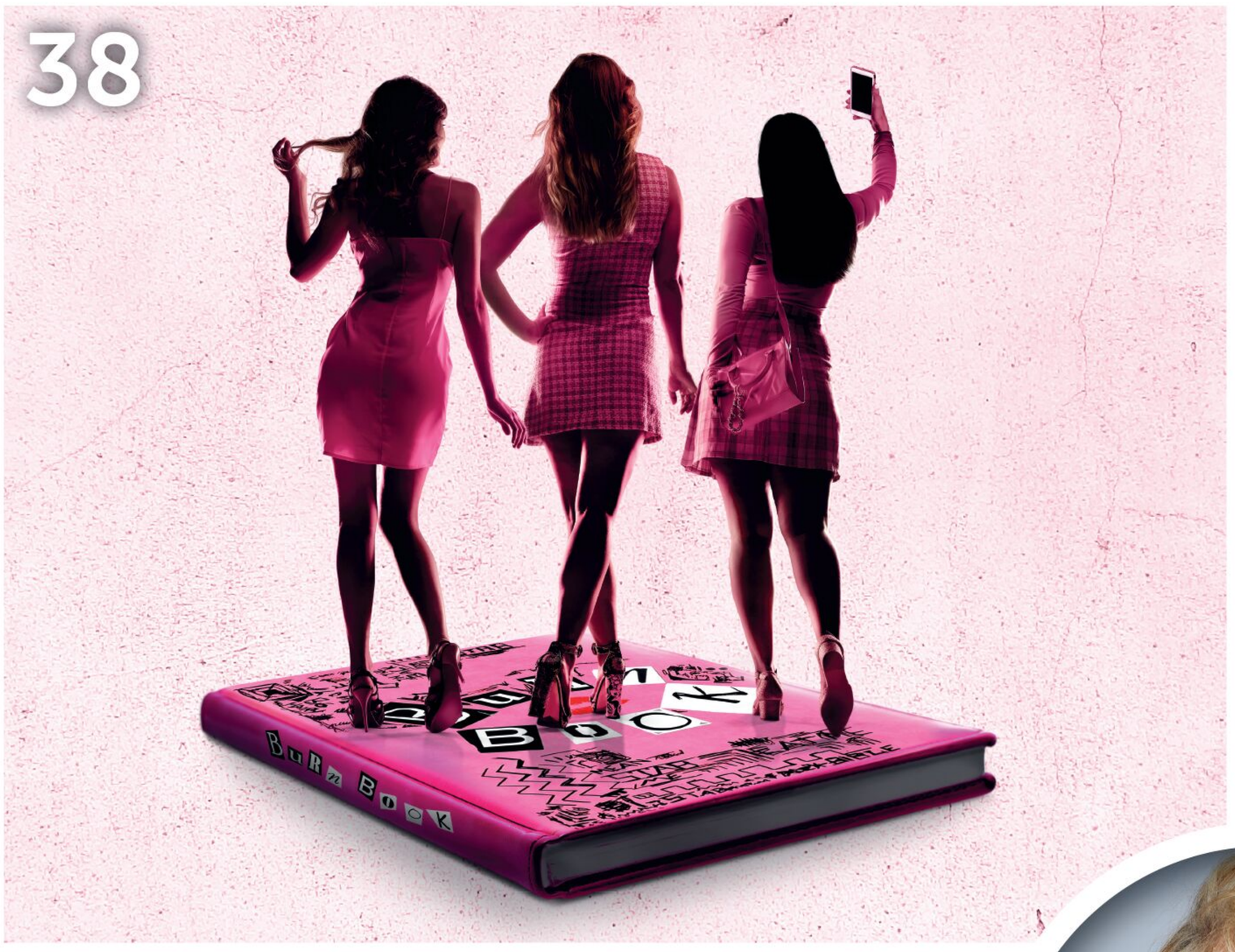

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Nicky Johnston / YellowBelly Photo / © Starlight Express/Detlef Overmann / Johan Persson/ Tristram Kenton

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Curtain Up!

The latest Musical Theatre news, plus exclusive interviews, announcements and reports

Rob Madge hits the road

A little nugget of pure joy is heading your way, courtesy of Rob Madge. Their fringe hit show, *My Son's a Queer, (But What Can You Do?)*, is embarking on its second UK tour, bringing to regional theatres the show that comes with the warning: 'Contains some swearing, a fair bit of precociousness... May cause happiness!'

Described in our launch issue by our reviewer Paul Vale as 'the sleeper hit of the post-lockdown period', the one-person show started out at the Turbine Theatre in 2021, championed by that venue's artistic director Paul Taylor-Mills. An 'uplifting celebration of growing up queer in a supportive environment', according to Vale, the musical has since enjoyed a sold-out run at the Edinburgh Fringe and twice taken the West End by storm. On the back of news that a planned Broadway run has been postponed, the prospect of a UK tour – once again taking in the Edinburgh Fringe – is extremely welcome.

When Madge announced the new tour on Instagram, they were thrilled at the chance to bring the show to 'places that might not have access to West End productions but need this representation'. They were also pleased to be going to Manchester 'during Manchester PRIDE – it's going to be perfect', and the Midlands – because 'my Midlands family are the heartbeat of the show and to do it down the road from them honestly makes me quite teary'.

Madge started working professionally at the age of nine, having started out staging shows in their living room and forcing family members to assist. These childhood antics provided the inspiration for *My Son's a Queer*, written and performed by Madge, directed by Luke Sheppard – whose name is cropping up everywhere at the moment (see page 30) – and with songs by Pippa Cleary (*The Great British Bake Off Musical*). The show is produced by Taylor-Mills and Bill Kenwright Ltd. When Kenwright died last October, Madge was one of many artists to pay tribute: 'Thank you Bill for believing in me and my work. Not many men would chair a football club and proudly produce a show celebrating queerness at the same time. I and many others owe so much to him.'

The UK tour runs from 8 July to 25 August, including a stint in Edinburgh from 1 to 16 August – visit @mysonsaqueer on all social media platforms

Monthly Musicals to be launched at Musical Con

Once again, *Musicals* will have a stand at this year's Musical Con – the annual all-singing, all-dancing Musical Theatre event which, as part of its launch two years ago, also hosted the launch of our very own magazine.

This year's event, from 19 to 20 October, is again significant for *Musicals*, since the October issue marks our first issue as a monthly publication. So do pop along to our stand to pick up a copy of the magazine, subscribe, or simply say hello!

Returning to ExCel London, the two-day convention will include anything and everything related to Musical Theatre, from performances on the festival-style main stage and fan competitions to panel talks and backstage demonstrations of puppetry, make-up and costumes. On top of all that, West End stars and creatives will lead workshops and masterclasses, providing industry insights for aspiring performers and curious amateurs alike.

If the event is anything like previous years, participants can be assured of a lively, welcoming space where a mutual love and appreciation of Musical Theatre is shared and built upon. As we wrote in our round-up last year, the convention has 'a wonderful sense of community, assuring visitors this really is a place where they belong'.

For full information and to buy tickets, visit musicalcon.co.uk

Kids Week returns to the West End for a whole season of free tickets

Running from 24 July to 6 September, Official London Theatre's Kids Week (now a whole season taking place over the summer holidays) returns to offer free tickets to children under 17 for a select number of West End musicals, plays, comedies and children's shows.

To qualify for the offer, children under 17 must be accompanied by a full-paying adult. Additionally, two more children can come along at half-price each.

Some shows during the week will also feature activity sessions, workshops and interactive curtain calls, offering young people a unique opportunity to get hands-on and learn all about the workings of a professional theatre production up-close.

At the time of writing, participating shows were still to be announced; ticket sales open on 11 June at 10am – for more information, visit officiallondontheatre.com/kids-week

Ramin Karimloo and Anoushka Lucas head to Young Vic

Musicals readers may remember that the Almeida Theatre recently staged *Cold War,* Conor McPherson's version of the 2018 film by Paweł Pawlikowski, which featured music by Elvis Costello (see the review in our February/March 2024 issue). This autumn, there'll be another film-to-stage adaptation featuring original songs by Costello: two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of Elia Kazan's 1957 film *A Face in the Crowd*, to be staged at the Young Vic, London, from 10 September to 9 November.

Ramin Karimloo and Anoushka Lucas play the lead roles of drifter Larry 'Lonesome' Rhodes and radio producer Marcia Jeffries (played in the film by Andy Griffith and Patricia Neal respectively). A West End and Broadway leading man, Karimloo is

perhaps best known for playing Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* (for which he received a Tony nomination) and The Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Love Never Dies*. This February, he starred in *The Addams Family* at the Palladium and, in March, made his operatic debut in *Songbird* with Washington National Opera. He'll shortly appear in *Titanic* with New York City Center's Encores!

Lucas, *Musicals*' inaugural Rising Star, was Olivier-nominated for her performance as Laurey in Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!* (also at the Young Vic for its UK premiere). Most recently, she reprised her one-woman show *Elephant* at the Bush Theatre, and played Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* in Sheffield.

The new show marks Kwame Kwei-Armah's final production as artistic director. Under his tenure, the venue's Musical Theatre productions have included *Fun Home*, *Mandela* and the upcoming *Passing Strange*. *For tickets, visit youngvic.org*

New musical based on the Post Office scandal set to tour

Rural touring theatre companies Pentabus and New Perspectives (both celebrating their 50th anniversaries this year) will co-produce a new musical *Make Good: The Post Office Scandal* this autumn.

The musical has been developed over three years and is based on interviews with former sub-postmasters who, along with around 900 colleagues, were wrongly prosecuted due to flaws in Fujitsu's Horizon computer system. The musical captures the courage and strength of these individuals as they fought for justice.

Writer Jeanie O'Hare was previously director of New Work Development at the Public Theater in New York. Music/lyrics are by Jim Fortune (*Mr Gum and the Dancing Bear*) with Maimuna Memon (*Manic Street Creature*). Pentabus's Elle While directs. *The tour starts in Ludlow in October – visit pentabus.co.uk and newperspectives.co.uk*

PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Senior / Danny Kaan

Schwartz's The Baker's Wife rises again

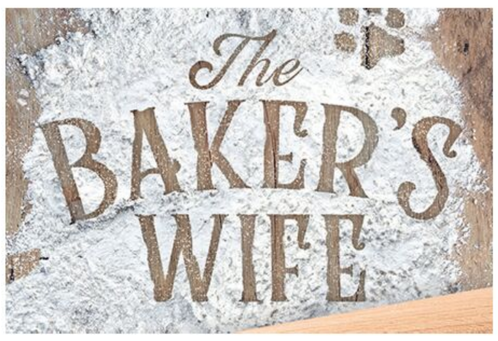
There'll be no loafing around at London's Menier Chocolate factory this summer! Stephen Schwartz and Joseph Stein's 1976 musical *The Baker's Wife* will be revived from 6 July to 14 September.

Lucie Jones (*Wicked*) takes the lead role of Geneviève, a young woman who arrives in a gossipy French provincial town with her older baker husband Aimable, played by Clive Rowe. Deciding that romantic passion is more enticing than baguettes, she embarks on an affair with the handsome Dominique (Joaquin Pedro Valdes, *Pacific Overtures*). Three-time Olivier nominee Josefina Gabrielle co-stars as narrator Denise.

The musical, based on Marcel Pagnol's 1938 film and Jean Giono's 1932 novel, was first staged in the UK in 1989, directed by Trevor Nunn. The show has become something of a cult classic and features the standard 'Meadowlark'. The 2011 Union Theatre staging starred Michael Matus as Aimable, who takes on the role of The Marquis at the Menier.

The production is directed by Gordon Greenberg, who previously oversaw the show at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse in 2005, and also helmed the Menier's 2017 production of *Barnum*. (He is currently represented on Broadway with *The Heart of Rock and Roll*.) Matt Cole (*Newsies*) provides the choreography. It's surely a must-see show for any Schwartz fan.

Overall, it's an exciting year for the composer. As well as the anticipated *Wicked* movie, his new musical *The Queen of Versailles* debuts in Boston from 16 July to 25 August, with Kristin Chenoweth. 'Unlimited' indeed! *Visit menierchocolatefactory.com*



Cameron Mackintosh writers scheme: next placements announced for 2024

The next placements have been announced for the Cameron Mackintosh Resident Writers Scheme. A two-person writing team – Rebecca Brewer and Daisy Chute, behind the developing musical *COVEN* – will be placed at MAST Mayflower Studios in Southampton, starting this summer. Among the projects they'll be working on is a new Jane Austen-inspired piece for a young company.

Gus Gowland, meanwhile, will be the Resident Composer at the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), Glasgow, from September. Gowland, whose musical *Mayflies* was reviewed in our June/July 2023 issue, will be developing a new show of his own, while also contributing to a range of NTS projects. *For more information, visit mercurymusicals.com and musicaltheatrenetwork.com*

Interval Chatter

Jordan Fisher has extended his run as Orpheus in Hadestown at the Walter Kerr Theatre, Broadway, until 15 September 2024. He has been in the role since November last year

The Olivier Award-winning production of Nicholas Hytner's **Guys & Dolls** at the Bridge Theatre has announced its final extension date of 4 January 2025

The **Wizard of Oz** returns to London fresh from its UK and Ireland tour for a limited four-week run at the Gillian Lynne Theatre from 15 August. It marks 85 years since the original film's release

Steps musical premiere **Here & Now** at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham, has been extended due to popular demand

Way down, **Hadestown**! The **Teen Edition** can now be licensed to youth and school productions in the US

Jason Donovan is reprising his role as the 'sweet transvestite' Frank 'N' Furter in the upcoming UK tour of the Rocky Horror Picture Show from 19 August

The newly founded **Ruthie Henshall's CAST** has been given approval for its BA Musical Theatre course to partner with Buckinghamshire New University

Broadway giant **Patti LuPone** is returning to the stage in new comedy The Roommate by Jen Silverman at the Booth Theatre from 29 August

Mercury Musical Developments and **Musical Theatre Network**, behind BEAM, will create a new base at Birmingham Hippodrome later this year

Brand-new musical **SuperYou** by Lourds Lane will have its first fully staged UK production this coming October at Leicester Curve

Countdown to...

Opening Night

Operatic soprano **Katie Bird** steps into the Musical Theatre world to play Eliza Doolittle

Has opera always been part of your life?
My parents are from working-class backgrounds, so opera was never a thing in our house. I grew up watching the Golden Age musicals with Judy Garland or Julie Andrews. It wasn't until I started having singing lessons that I was told my voice was most suited to singing opera.

What was it like to audition for Eliza?
I never thought I'd get the opportunity to do something like this. It was quite nerve-wracking as I'd never sung that repertoire in front of anyone before – I wasn't sure if I'd be any good!

Have you been in any musicals before now?
When I was 15, I joined the Maidstone Amateur Operatic Society where we did *Kismet*, which is on the border between opera and Musical Theatre. A few years ago, I wanted to experience the Musical Theatre-style open auditioning process which we don't really have in the operatic world. I went along to the open auditions for the UK tour of *The Phantom of the Opera* and, after queuing for six hours, I got down to the final two for Carlotta. It was a real learning experience and gave me a lot of respect for what Musical Theatre performers must go through.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Victoria Cadisch

Just you wait for Katie Bird in the classic My Fair Lady

Do you approach Musical Theatre like you do opera?
It's the same process learning the music, starting from the notes and the rhythms then trying to colour the music and put your stamp on it. However, unlike in opera, a lot more of the music sits in the lower part of my voice, closer to my speaking voice. I've also never sung onstage with a mic. In opera, we're expected to project over an orchestra, so I'm interested to see how that affects the timbre. There's also a freedom with mics as you can dare to take it back and make it intimate.

How does Eliza speak to you?
She's a statement on class. My natural accent is not far from where we start with Eliza (though I do gravel it up a bit in the show). I have experienced those prejudices and preconceptions other people make based on your accent, so I can relate to her on that. I love her freedom; she doesn't care what other people think of her – she gets on with life because she has to survive.

Are there any other Musical Theatre roles you'd like to play?
I would love to be Maria in *The Sound of Music* – I can start ticking off all the Julie Andrews roles!

As told to Jonathan Whiting

In a co-production with Opera North, My Fair Lady plays at the Leeds Playhouse from 31 May to 29 June – for tickets, visit leedsplayhouse.org.uk

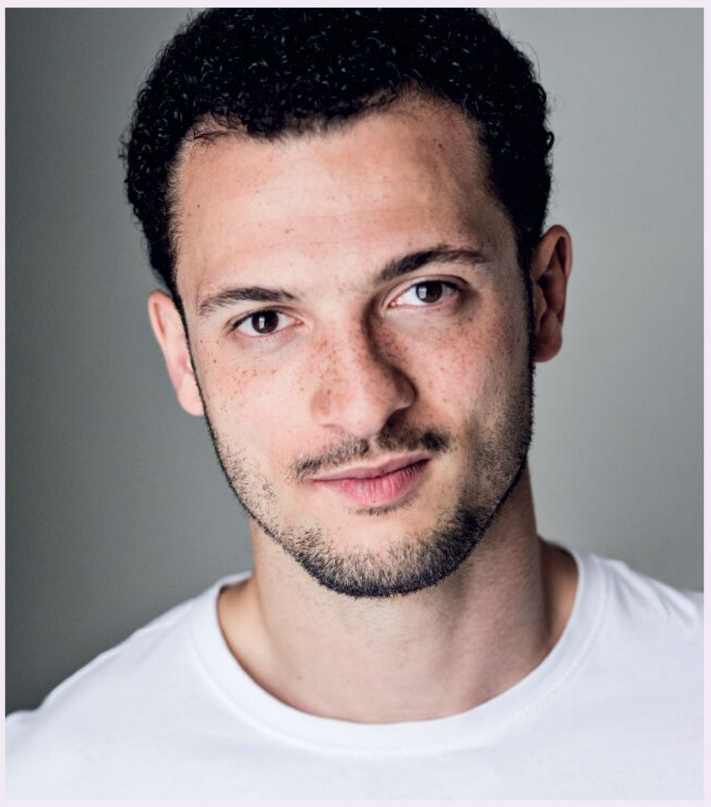
Closing Night

Jamael Westman explains how the themes in London Tide are not too distant from life today

How does it feel to be making your debut at the National Theatre?
It's a bit surreal. Thinking about all the shows I've seen there over the years that have blown my mind and had me in bits, I feel blessed to share in this legacy. I'm so lucky be a part of this art form that contributes to society on such a major stage.

Were you involved in the development of London Tide?
I was in a couple of workshops last year, so I've been grappling with it for a while now. The final product is so radically different to when I read it. It's down to bringing people to it, with their own ideas, opinions, characterisations and, on top of that, the lighting, sound design and staging.

Tell us about your character Eugene Wrayburn...
He's a man having a crisis of purpose. He's an upper-class barrister but feels he's in the wrong pond. He's one for social justice; he recognises the law is misused to favour the wealthy. He pursues a case that leads him to Lizzie Hexam and the underworld and finds himself compelled to deliver justice for them. Then he gets tangled up in a web of his own.



Jamael Westman makes his National Theatre debut

What research did you do?
I read the novel the show is based on (*Our Mutual Friend*), and also *Charles Dickens: A Life* by Claire Tomalin. There are lots of themes from Dickens's own life that he interwove into his novels such as his relationship with Ellen Ternan (who was many years his junior), which parallels the relationship between Eugene and Lizzie. There's a sense of the power dynamics between them; both in terms of class and gender, especially at that time.

What is PJ Harvey's music like?
I love it, it's not the music you'd expect to hear in musicals. It's like an album in itself – I also love how it features and adapts to each performer's own voice. Polly's music creates this unique alternative genre-bending sound world you can't pin down.

Are there any future projects you want to be part of?
I want to be part of anything that makes you question yourself, your environment, and your society. The arts are needed as a tonic and a provocation for what's happening right now. We're becoming more and more apathetic to the world around us and I see actors as ambassadors of empathy. Theatre reminds us of our humanity and that we care for a reason.

As told to Jonathan Whiting

London Tide plays at the National Theatre, London, until 22 June – for tickets and more information, visit nationaltheatre.org.uk

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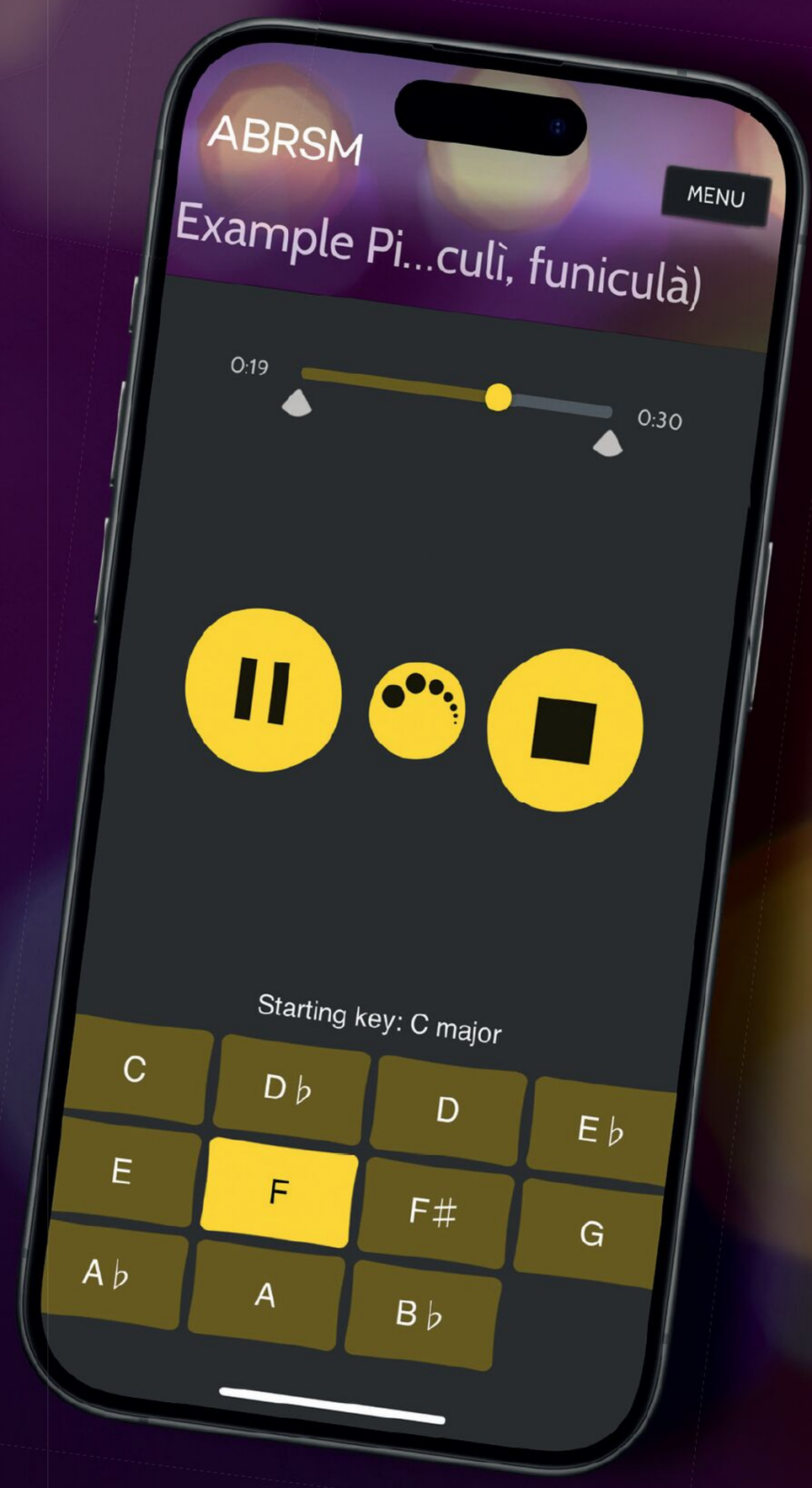

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Bring Back That Show!

The Secret Garden

Edwardian children's author Frances Hodgson Burnett has an enduring influence on many millennial women, thanks to the enchanting film versions of *The Secret Garden* (1993) and *A Little Princess* (1995).

Shortly before these films, however, there was the late Lucy Simon (see Edward Seckerson's appraisal of her work in Issue 2) and Marsha Norman's *The Secret Garden* musical (1991). The Broadway production ran for 709 performances and won three Tony Awards.

Spoilt, sour Mary Lennox arrives in Yorkshire from India following her neglectful parents' death in a cholera epidemic. Her 'hunchback' uncle-by-marriage Archibald Craven is a recluse who's consumed with grief for his deceased wife, Lily. Mary brings her aunt's beloved garden back to life and is able to heal herself, her sickly cousin Colin, and the adults around her.

Simon's score is best known for the euphoric male duet 'Lily's Eyes' and there are also folky numbers for Mary's child-of-nature friend Dickon, lullabies, and dream-like sequences. Most celebrated for her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *'night, Mother*, Norman, who won a Tony for Best Book of a Musical, fleshes out the adult characters and explores the relationship between the living and the dead through a chorus of ghosts. There's certainly a touch of *The Phantom of the Opera* in the gothic romanticism and the *Beauty and the Beast*-esque love story.

Controversially, I find the Broadway cast album, led by Mandy Patinkin as Archibald, rather bombastic and self-consciously 'wuthering' (and the less said about some of the accents the better) – though the much-missed Rebecca Luker couldn't be more angelically maternal as the spectral Lily. I feel that the London recording has a greater sense of freshness. This revised version, which was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company and played in Stratford-upon-Avon and the West End in 2000-01, placed less emphasis on the ghosts, and Philip Quast gives a beautifully multi-faceted performance as Archibald.

Derrick Davis and Sierra Boggess performing in LA

To date, *The Secret Garden* hasn't returned to Broadway or the West End. It was performed at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles last year (again, see Issue 2) starring Sierra Boggess. In the UK, the show was most recently seen in a concert version at the London Palladium with Hadley Fraser and Emma Williams in 2022.

An outdoor venue would be ideal for a full production. This summer, the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in London presents a new non-musical version of the story but perhaps another al fresco venue such as Leicestershire's Kilworth House Theatre or Chester's Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre might give this lovely, pure-hearted and unashamedly emotive show a chance to bloom again.

Julia Rank

Venue Focus

Gillian Lynne Theatre

Where? Drury Lane, Covent Garden, central London.

Significant dates There has been live entertainment on this site since the 17th century, when Restoration actress Nell Gwyn entertained customers of the Great Mogul tavern. By 1851, the Middlesex Musical Hall was established, which was in turn rebuilt as the New Middlesex Theatre of Varieties in 1911. The theatre closed in 1959 and remained empty until it was demolished in 1965 and replaced in 1973 by the current building.

This new theatre was known as the New London Theatre and bought by Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group in 1991. Lloyd Webber subsequently renamed the venue the Gillian Lynne Theatre in 2018 in memory of the dancer, choreographer and director who, among her many achievements, choreographed *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Aspects of Love*. It remains the only West End theatre to be named after a non-royal woman.

The brutalist Gillian Lynne Theatre

Architect The brutalist glass and concrete exterior was jointly designed by architect Paul Tvrtkovic and set designer Sean Kenny who also designed the sets for the Lionel Bart musicals, *Oliver!* and *Blitz!* The theatre, as well as doubling as a television studio, also contains an underground car park, a cabaret venue, a basement nightclub and a residential tower.

Capacity 1,294.

About Despite being one of the West End's more modern theatres, it has hosted many famous musicals. Within its opening year it was home to the 1973 West End premiere of *Grease* (cast members included Richard Gere and, later, Elaine Paige). In 1974, Sheila Hancock starred in *Déjà Revue.*

From 1977 to 1980, the theatre was home to the ITV show *This is Your Life*, hosted by Eamonn Andrews. The venue returned to live theatre in 1981 when Lloyd Webber's multi-award-winning musical *Cats* (choreographed by the theatre's now namesake) began what would be a record-breaking 21-year run.

The early 21st century brought Bill Kenwright's production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, as well as the flop new musicals *Gone With the Wind* and *Imagine This* (both 2008).

The National Theatre's *War Horse* transferred there in 2009 and enjoyed an acclaimed seven-year run. It was followed by Daniel Evans's production of *Show Boat* and two more Lloyd Webber shows: the West End premiere of *School of Rock* (2016) and the world premiere of *Cinderella* (retitled *Bad Cinderella* when it transferred to Broadway) in 2021, led by Carrie Hope Fletcher.

Last year, Charlie Stemp starred in the Chichester Festival Theatre transfer of *Crazy for You*. Currently the Gillian Lynne is home to the Olivier Award-winning Sheffield Theatres production of *Standing at the Sky's Edge* which plays until 3 August. This will be followed by a short run of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Jonathan Whiting

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy of MurphyMade / Standing at the Sky's Edge

From the Green Room

Edward Seckerson takes a look at the inventive originality of the work of Lionel Bart, the East End composer whose musicals provided the soundtrack to his early life

Jason Carr's piece on Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (*Musicals* Issue 4) brought back precious memories – not just of that show (for which I auditioned as a rather impressionable 11 year old) but of the two big shows that followed it: *Blitz!* and *Maggie May*.

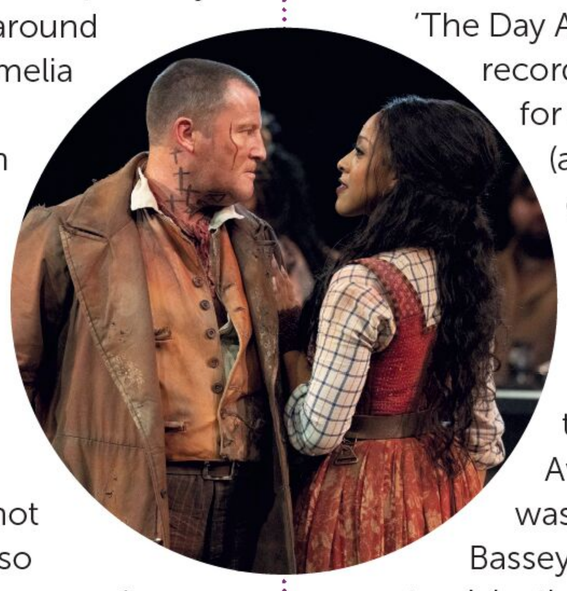
To this day I cannot quite believe that I stood on the stage of what was then the New Theatre on St Martin's Lane (now the Noel Coward), on *that* iconic Sean Kenny set, to sing 'Where Is Love?', nervously negotiating its difficult-to-keep-in-tune opening melisma (so hard on one syllable), only to be completely thrown by the audition pianist's failure to play the repeat. 'We'll let you know', came the voice from the stalls. It was almost enough not getting the call-back.

Bart's unschooled gifts were astonishingly sophisticated in an off-kilter kind of way. Yes, we can all sing along to the catchy East End pub rousers like 'Consider Yourself' and 'Oom-Pah-Pah' – we know he had a natural way with a catchy hook – but it was the quirkiness of the character numbers that caught me unawares when I first heard the cast album. The title song alone felt very avant-garde to my young ears, and I hadn't at that point identified Bart's allusions to the Jewish cantor in 'Boy For Sale'. It was strange, haunting, and yes, Dickensian.

His lyrics, too, were so honest and *funny*. I think 'That's Your Funeral' (how *could* they have cut that from the movie?) is wickedly on the money and 'Reviewing the Situation'... genius. A gift for any actor.

I saw *Oliver!* six times I believe, but only once from a comfortable stalls seat, thanks to my parents, and it was they, at my request, who treated me on birthdays to the subsequent shows – *Blitz!* (1962) while *Oliver!* was still running, and *Maggie May* (1964), both at the Adelphi Theatre. What a productive period that was for Bart and what a heyday for the British musical. *Blitz!* was not eagerly but deliriously awaited and the cast album – which almost arrived before the show did – was/is something of a classic. The advance publicity was largely built around the newcomer Amelia Bayntun as the indomitable earth mother Mrs Blitzstein and Sean Kenny's astonishing (for their time) pyrotechnics.

Above Billy Jenkins, Simon Lipkin, Shanay Holmes and Aaron Sidwell will star in Oliver! at Chichester **Below** The 2023-24 production at Leeds Playhouse



The show was *huge* and I have not to this day heard so many spontaneous rounds of applause for scenic effects. At one preview – a royal gala – Princess Margaret's party was enveloped in smoke due to a technical miscalculation and with all the debris falling so spectacularly onstage, there must have been a moment or two when life started to imitate art for those remembering the real thing.

Bart's *Blitz!* score was memorable for its big East End knees-ups – the opening 'Our Hotel' was a cracker, as was 'Who's This Geezer Hitler?' – but it also became famous for 'The Day After Tomorrow', recorded specially for the show (and heard onstage via a wireless) by the nation's sweetheart Vera Lynn, and the ballad 'Far Away', which was a hit for Shirley Bassey. But again, I was struck by the quirkiness of numbers like 'Mums and Dads' with kids imitating their sparring parents in raucous counterpoint or 'We're Going to the Country', where the oddball melody so brilliantly suggested the young evacuees singing off-key.

But I guess my favourite among the Bart scores remains *Maggie May* (based on the old ballad/shanty) – again memorably staged at the Adelphi with Kenneth Haigh and Rachel Roberts (then Mrs Rex Harrison) and a young Julia McKenzie in the ensemble. This time, Bart (having done the 'triple' of book, music and lyrics twice) entrusted the book to the Welsh playwright Alun Owen which undoubtedly gave the show a dramatic resonance it might not otherwise have had.

For me, this is the most diversely British of Bart's scores with an added Scouse flavour to the music and lyrics which feels resolutely authentic.

But again, offsetting the robust point numbers like 'Day Don't Do Dat T'Day' is that Bart otherworldliness lending such strangeness to the opening 'The Ballad of the Liver Bird'. You know instantly that there is a genuine 'original' at work here.

Famously, Judy Garland became smitten with the score (the artist had such good taste) and made an EP featuring the two big ballads 'It's Yourself' and 'The Land of Promises' in, sadly, quite awful pop-inspired arrangements. But how special and poignant they are on the cast album.

One last footnote. Back in 1992 the National Youth Theatre revived the show at what is now the Peacock Theatre and naturally I was there. In the bar afterwards I spotted Bart and, overcoming my nervousness, told him how it was my favourite of his shows and how I'd seen the original. 'You don't look old enough,' he said. I'll take that. M

'Celebrating Lionel Bart' plays at JW3, London, on 7 July – visit jw3.org.uk; Oliver! is at Chichester Festival Theatre from 8 July to 7 September before transferring to the West End – visit cft.org.uk

"Lionel Bart's unschooled gifts as a composer were astonishingly sophisticated in an off-kilter kind of way"

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matt Crockett / Alastair Muir

‘THE HOTTEST OF TICKETS’ VOGUE
LAYTON WILLIAMS
RHEA NORWOOD
CABARET
THE MUSICAL AT THE KIT KAT CLUB
book by Joe Masteroff
music by John Kander
lyrics by Fred Ebb
based on the play by John van Druten and stories by Christopher Isherwood
WWW.KITKAT.CLUB
Photography by Dan Kennedy

Elaine's Page

Cabaret

Elaine Paige explores how Kander and Ebb's Cabaret pioneered the concept musical, where the theme is the thing, and celebrates the show's divinely decadent heroine Sally Bowles

In the odd quiet moment, my mind sometimes drifts to wondering how Sally Bowles's girlfriend Elsie is getting on in those four sordid rooms in Chelsea. Poor lamb. I mean, there are worse places to be holed up, but their digs were rough enough for Sally to sing up a storm about them in the title number of John Kander and Fred Ebb's enduring and electrifying 1966 musical masterpiece *Cabaret*.

Talk about a show that's weathered the test of time. Chelsea may have changed from a rural village on the banks of the Thames to a bohemian outpost to a chic urban hotspot – but *Cabaret* has always stood firm.

I suppose the best barometer we have for *Cabaret*'s perpetuity is Rebecca Frecknall's sinister, sumptuous, award-winning revival, which is currently wowing audiences at London's Playhouse Theatre (Kit Kat Club) and at the August Wilson Theatre on Broadway. Frecknall's *Cabaret* is very 'now' in terms of its gender and sexual fluidity in that ever-changing nightclub where nothing is off limits... But the core story remains the same.

It's set amidst the rise of Nazi power in 1930s Berlin, as an American writer, Cliff Bradshaw, and a British cabaret performer, Sally Bowles, hook up for a steamy love affair. Steamy – but stormy... Because against the backdrop of a city in turmoil, their relationship is tested. And with political trends continuing to be unsettling over the years, *Cabaret* has never stopped feeling contemporary. In fact, its ongoing relevance is undoubtedly why it's been revived in almost every decade since, in addition to the stylish 1972 film adaptation.

Above/below Luke Treadaway and Cara Delevingne star in London's Cabaret

How I love that all-time great performance from Liza Minnelli. She commands the screen throughout – and she snagged the Best Actress Academy Award for her efforts. Not only that, but Bob Fosse also 'robbed' Francis Ford Coppola of the Best Director Oscar for *The Godfather* for it.

Quite right too. *Cabaret*'s songs were better!

It's hard to believe that it's over half a century since the film sashayed into cinemas. It still feels fresh and daring to this very day.

As for the music, the Devil has all the best tunes they say, and *Cabaret* fills its boots with them. There's the satanically seductive 'Willkommen', the comical, raunchy 'Two Ladies', the flirtatious 'Don't Tell Mama', and 'Maybe This Time' (added for the movie), which hauntingly depicts a wounded woman on the brink of despair.

In terms of *Cabaret* being a game-changer, we'd do well to remember that the original stage show was the very first 'post-book musical'. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* had given rise to a glut of book musicals, in which the songs advanced the plot. *Cabaret*, however, was director Hal Prince's first experiment in making 'a concept musical'– i.e. a show in which the overall theme or message is more important than the story itself.

Hal staged the show in an unusual and ground-breaking way. As the audience entered the auditorium, they were met with a raised curtain that exposed the stage – a stage that only had a large mirror on it, which of course reflected them taking their seats. And, instead of an overture, the opening number was introduced by a drum roll and a cymbal crash. Another Hal innovation was that the show mixed dialogue scenes with songs that provided social commentary. Funny really, because we seem to accept anything and everything now, including a leading man who sings out on the street in all weathers, in Jamie Lloyd's reimagined *Sunset Boulevard*!

For me, *Cabaret* is a firm favourite because of Sally Bowles. I just think she's 'divinely decadent' – and although I never got to play her, she's one of my dream roles. I would have loved to have performed the brassy 'Mein Herr' in a bowler hat and had the chance to give audiences an insight into all her nuances.

She's eccentric, vulnerable and emotionally unstable – but I so admire how she lives her life moment by moment, eternally optimistic. She always remembers the all-important life lesson that she learned from her good friend Elsie: 'What good is sitting alone in your room?'

It may have been a sordid boudoir – but the pair of them were no fools. M

Cabaret is at London's Playhouse Theatre until 1 February 2025, and at New York's August Wilson Theatre until 1 March 2025 (see review on page 52) – for more information and tickets, visit kitkat.club; 'Elaine Paige on Sunday' is on BBC Radio 2 at 1pm; follow her on X @elaine_paige

It's never stopped feeling contemporary; its relevance is why the show has been revived in almost every decade since

PHOTOGRAPHY: Nicky Johnston / Marc Brenner

A Day in the Life of...

Elizabeth Newman, artistic director of Pitlochry Festival Theatre

Since taking charge at the Scottish venue in 2019, there is rarely a typical day for this artistic director

Bright and early

An average day can begin in the middle of the night because I have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. So there isn't really a 'typical day'. Today, for example, we were up at 6:30am to do some baking! We ate eggs for breakfast and then my daughter watched *Bluey* while I had a shower. After that, there was just enough time for my partner and I to have a quick cup of tea and check emails before I headed into work at about 8:50am. I live close to the theatre so it doesn't take me too long to get there; I usually set off with a packed lunch because you never know what the day's going to hold. One of the reasons I wanted to be an artistic director is because I love the fact that every day is different.

Morning meetings

When I arrive at work, I'll look at the agenda for the day. I might need to make a quick producing phone call about a show we're doing that's going on tour, for example. And because my role is also an executive senior leadership role, I need to attend senior management team meetings too. And then it'll be back-to-back catch-ups with, say, the communications team about a promotional film we're working on, or our scenic design team who might be working on the set for an upcoming show.

Below left Elizabeth Newman **Above** The Pitlochry Theatre is welcome to all

A lot of what I do involves looking ahead – to the 2025 rehearsal schedule, for example – as well as planning for events that are just around the corner. Our 'Light Hope Joy Day' is part of Refugee Week in June, so I'll need to look at all the artistic content for that and plan out the day for our visitors. We'll be inviting a combination of refugees and asylum seekers living in the region, as well as the residents of Pitlochry, to come to the theatre for a day of poetry, music, tours, food, and arts and crafts.

Liaising with creatives

In addition to working with our scenic design team, I'll often need to talk to other creatives, too. For our festive production of *The Sound of Music*, for example, I'll be communicating with the musical director, and I'm also involved in the child-actor recruitment process for the Von Trapp family. On top of this, I'm designing costumes for an upcoming production of *Nan Shepherd: Naked and Unashamed* so I'll need to schedule costume design meetings with the creative team about that. I'll also have little catch-ups with directors such as Sam Hardie, who's directing *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* which opens in June.

Afternoon tasks

After lunch, I might be rehearsing shows (I'm a producer as well as an artistic director). But depending on where we are in the year, an afternoon may include board or committee meetings, or writing fundraising documents. I'll soon be chairing a meeting for our Christmas fundraising campaign, for example, as well as a meeting to discuss the wider fundraising for our Musicals Commissioning Hub with Capital Theatres; this is a programme where we look to nurture Scottish writers, composers, actors and other creatives and aim to create brand-new musicals. We also need to continue to fundraise for our VISION Capital Project which will improve the accessibility and sustainability of the theatre.

Preparing a buffet of theatre

A lot of my time is spent programming shows for our Festival. It's about giving audiences a diverse diet: there has to be something for everyone. The majority of people will pick up a sausage roll – i.e. something 'traditional', tried and tested. But you also want to make sure that there's that 'Cajun chicken kebab' show – something that might not be for everyone but that some people will really like that and be up for. And most people will want something sweet at the end!

Theatre for all seasons

As we have a Festival programme, the busiest period is over the summer when a lot of urban theatres would wind down for maintenance. We do, however, have a variety of events over the whole year as well: we have our literature festival in February; lots of visiting concerts during the spring and autumn; and we also produce shows in the autumn and winter – such as *The Sound of Music* which opens in November and runs until just before Christmas.

Our rural location means that, for the Festival season, our creatives and actors move here for seven months of the year to make the productions. This is very different to theatres in, say, Edinburgh or Glasgow, where the creatives might already live nearby. Most of our audience members travel here from all over Scotland – although a fifth come from the rest of the UK and even further afield. Compared to most urban theatres, which pull their audiences from a 30-mile radius, many of our patrons travel hundreds of miles.

There's no place like home

When I finish work, I like to spend time with my daughter. She enjoys dancing, and she and my partner love to go swimming together. We'll have supper, play some games, and then we'll do bathtime and read some stories before she goes to bed. After that, I might watch a film or read, or, if I need to, return to my emails and clear a few more things from the day that's just passed. M

For more information on the Pitlochry Festival programme, visit pitlochryfestivaltheatre.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Fraser Band

All That Dazzles About Town

London-based reviewer **Daz Gale** picks his personal highlights from an action-packed few weeks of attending Musical Theatre shows, concerts and events

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan and Lambert Jackson / Mark Senior / Marc Brenner / Mark Senior / Craig Fuller / Tristram Kenton / Pamela Raith

24 MARCH 2024

American composer **Jason Robert Brown** returned to London for his biggest show in the UK to date, treating audiences at the **London Palladium** to songs from his illustrious career. Alfie Boe joined him for 'Wondering' from *The Bridges of Madison County* but it was Cynthia Erivo's performances that brought the house down, particularly tackling three songs from *The Last Five Years*. Her phenomenal vocals and Brown's songwriting abilities proved to be a match made in heaven, resulting in a wonderful night befitting the writer's talents and legacy.

26 MARCH 2024

New musical **Wild About You** chose the vast space of **Theatre Royal, Drury Lane** for its world premiere with a dream cast including Rachel Tucker, Jamie Muscato, Oliver Tompsett, Todrick Hall and Eric McCormack. With no shortage of powerhouse vocals and some gorgeous songs from Chilina Kennedy, this was a show full of potential, even if it's not quite there yet. The story and structure proved messy at times, but with the right tweaks, this could be something special. Definitely one to watch.

6 APRIL 2024

A new party rolled into town as **Priscilla The Party!** took over the new hi-tech space of **HERE at Outernet, Soho**. A new twist on the classic *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, the show had a club setting, with audience members immersed in the action (seating and dining options were available). The show, which closed early on 26 May, wasn't always sure what it wanted to be, and at times the theatre elements crucial to its connection with the audience were lost, but the cast could not be faulted – particularly the stunning performances from Trevor Ashley, Owain Williams and Reece Kerridge.

8 APRIL 2024

Hot on the heels of the success of *Death Note* last year, fellow manga story **Your Lie in April** enjoyed its European- and English-language premiere for three very special concerts at **Theatre Royal, Drury Lane**. Like its predecessor, this also featured stunning music by Frank Wildhorn, with numbers 'If I Can't Hear the Music' and 'In Your Hands' among the highlights. There was something truly beautiful about this story of a young piano prodigy rediscovering his love for music, with lead performances from Zheng Xi Yong and Rumi Sutton further elevating the show. A beautiful, note-perfect piece which is now, entirely unsurprisingly, transferring to the West End in June for a 12-week run.

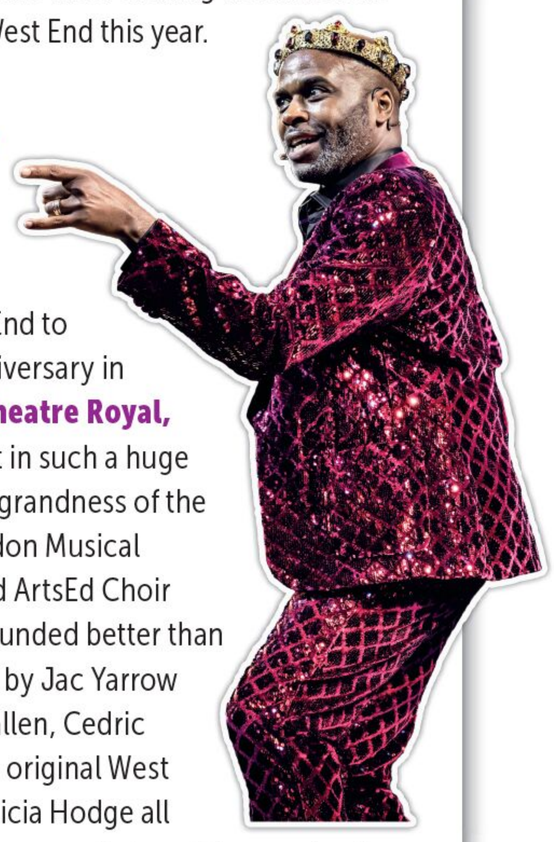
16 APRIL 2024

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of its premiere, **Ushers: The Front of House Musical** returned to London for a new production at **The Other Palace Studio** which ran until 19 May. Set over one shift of the fictional *Love Island: The Musical* (surely a matter of when rather than if), it is full of niche musical references any theatre obsessive will howl with laughter over, rewritten to include current theatre news. Danielle Rose, Cleve September and Luke Bayer were among the six cast members, all of whom delivered fantastic performances even if the material didn't always land. It may be flawed as a piece of theatre but as a fun night out, you couldn't go wrong.

23 APRIL 2024

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York) has transferred to the **Criterion Theatre** in the West End in a production slicker and stronger than the already impressive one at the Kiln Theatre last year. Sam Tutty and Dujonna Gift deliver powerhouse performances, showing off their phenomenal talents in an intimate two-hander. It is the writing of Jim Barne and Kit Buchan that truly shines in a highly comical yet sentimental and moving story full of instantly memorable songs such as earworm 'New York' and Tutty's tender solo 'About to Go In'. Utterly charming in every way, this sweet show has to be one of the most exciting new musicals to be opening in the West End this year.

29 APRIL 2024



Stephen Schwartz's classic **Pippin** returned to the West End to celebrate its 50th anniversary in a special concert at **Theatre Royal, Drury Lane**. Being set in such a huge space played into the grandness of the themes, with the London Musical Theatre Orchestra and ArtsEd Choir ensuring the songs sounded better than ever. A dream cast led by Jac Yarrow as Pippin with Zizi Strallen, Cedric Neal, Lucie Jones and original West End cast member Patricia Hodge all gave standout performances, but on this occasion it was all about Alex Newell's sensational turn as Leading Player, which brought the house down. With so many musical concerts taking place over the last few months, none have managed to reach the pure magic of this extraordinary production.

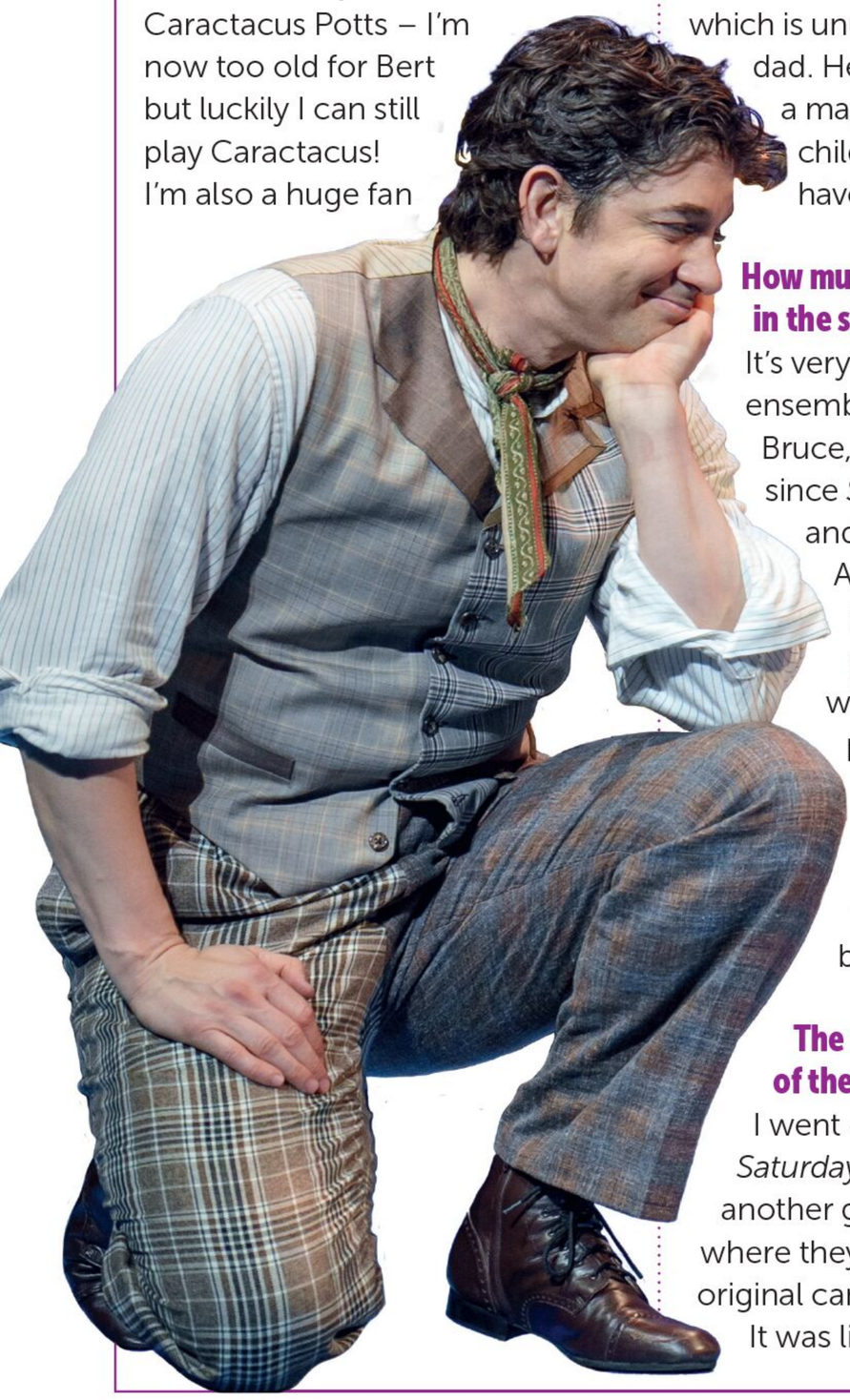
Follow All That Dazzles on X, Instagram and Facebook – @ATDazzles – and keep up with all the latest reviews at allthatdazzles.co.uk

Backstage with...

Adam Garcia, currently touring the UK as Caractacus Potts – the idealistic inventor of toot sweets and a magical flying car in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

What attracted you to Chitty?

When I was in *42nd Street* last year, the producer David Ian said that he was planning to stage a tour and asked if I'd be interested. We've worked together several times and I really trust him. As a child, I loved Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins* and then I found out he was also in *Chitty*, which also has songs by the Sherman Brothers. I've always wanted to play either Bert or Caractacus Potts – I'm now too old for Bert but luckily I can still play Caractacus! I'm also a huge fan of Michael Ball and saw him play the role three times in the original London Palladium production.



How have you approached the role of Caractacus Potts?

Caractacus is quite childlike but also anxious over whether his choice to live a non-traditional kind of life has been the right decision. There's a real conflict over whether he's been a good parent. He's such a doting father, which is unusual for an Edwardian dad. He wants to create a magical world for his children even though they haven't got any money.

How much dancing features in the show?

It's very intensive for the ensemble. I've known Karen Bruce, our choreographer, since *Saturday Night Fever* and I love her work. As Caractacus, I'm in a handful of production numbers where I dance properly, including 'Me Ol' Bamboo' with all the sticks, but I also get to sit in the car a lot! It's the best of both worlds.

The car is, of course, one of the stars of the show...

I went on *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* – another goal accomplished! – where they had one of the original cars from the movie. It was like a truck. Ours isn't as big but we are using one of the vehicles from the original Palladium production. It's absolutely beautiful.

What's it like working with the child actors?

I'm utterly staggered by them. They're such natural talents and so at ease onstage. There are four pairs and they all have different takes on Jeremy and Jemima. The show will never get stale with their spontaneous energy around.

What's touring like?

I've never done a full UK tour before so I'm so excited to be visiting so many different towns and cities. I first moved to the UK from Australia when I was 20 but there are so many places I've never been to. I can't wait to go to Llandudno and explore the North Wales coast. I'm a huge *Fawlty Towers* fan and I'll finally see Torquay! I love Liverpool and Newcastle and I've heard great things about the audiences there. Touring is quite full-on and I'm looking after myself by visiting local cafes and art galleries and going for walks to get to know the places I'm staying in.

You've worked in Australia, the UK and the US...

There's lots of phenomenal work and talent in Australia but the main difference is the scale and volume of theatre in the UK. There's also so much history. Ellie Nunn, daughter of Sir Trevor, plays Truly Scrumptious in the show – I worked with Trevor on *Kiss Me, Kate* and he's such a giant. I feel so grateful to have been accepted by the British theatre community and I feel very much at home here. I've been in films in the US, which of course has a huge film industry, but so does the UK.

Do you have any dream roles?

A Broadway show is a huge dream of mine; for various reasons, it hasn't happened yet. I was a finalist for the role of the dad in *Dear Evan Hansen* and I hope to get a chance to play him in the future. I've also always wanted to play Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show*.

What do you hope audiences will take away from Chitty?

I hope audiences, especially children, are given a sense of what magic onstage looks like, especially if it leaves a sense of joy that they're able to take with them into their everyday lives. M

As told to Julia Rank

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang tours the UK until 10 May 2025 (Garcia performs until 29 December) – for more information and tickets, visit chittyontour.com; read our review on page 44

PHOTOGRAPHY: Paul Coltas / Faye Thomas / Philip Vile

BY DEFINITION...

Thrust stage / noun – A stage that extends out into the auditorium, with the audience sitting on three sides

From the amphitheatres of Ancient Greece to the Globe Theatre where the words of Shakespeare were first heard 400 years ago, the thrust stage is one of the oldest forms of theatrical space. Named after the notion that the stage 'thrusts' out into the auditorium, the intimacy and versatile nature of thrust stages has become popular in regional theatres – such as Chichester Festival Theatre (right) – and other theatres that stage a wide variety of productions, such as the National Theatre.

Behind The Song

Lin-Manuel Miranda's 'Alexander Hamilton' from Hamilton

Musician **Joe Stilgoe** explains how the opening number of Lin-Manuel Miranda's mega hit plunges the audience into the deep end with a rap song that isn't actually rapped

Previously, on 'Behind The Song'... We began this particular word-fuelled thread two editions ago with Meredith Willson's 'Ya Got Trouble', the song that introduced the spoken lyric (dare we say early rap?) to Broadway audiences in *The Music Man*; we then progressed to 'The Rap' from *Starlight Express* – family connection noted. The only logical step on the theatre rap-ladder leads us to a guy who came from Washington Heights and ended up in Washington. In the White House.

In The Heights was a game-changer itself – a colourful, brash romantic piragua of a musical stuffed with Latin rhythms, hip-hop-inspired machine-gun lyrics, salsa – a musical about growing up in a largely Dominican neighbourhood of Manhattan, with its inherent ancestry, cultural roots and music. So, he'd already brought rap back to the theatre, but his next move was the biggie. The child that got all the attention, the bigger slice of the cake (and the one that knew all the words).

Above On tour **Below** The original on Broadway, led by Lin-Manuel Miranda

On 12 May 2009 Lin-Manuel Miranda is invited by Barack and Michelle Obama to perform songs from *In The Heights* at a poetry-and-song event at the White House. Miranda chooses instead to perform a completely new composition from a show that doesn't exist yet. Just him and collaborator Alex Lacamoire on piano. Here's how it starts:

'How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a / Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten / Spot in the Caribbean by providence impoverished in squalor / Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?'

Lin! This is the opening of a musical. You're supposed to ease people in... All we get at the top of the show before this explosion of exposition and lyrical ingenuity is one bar – that bolero-style riff and that famous three note violin line. Then we're off. Hold on to your wigs.

As with all the most successful stage shows, the piece that was to become *Hamilton* went through a gestation period of almost six years from that point before it landed at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on 46th Street (where *In The Heights* had been).

There were workshops, tryouts, tricky recording sessions, despair and worry from the investors, and often a complete disbelief that somebody, *anybody*, would want to write a hip-hop musical about the white guy on the American $10 bill. Alexander Hamilton was a distant figure in most average Americans' memories, let alone the rest of the world. Yet, here we are, with this show and this style of storytelling part of our culture.

'Alexander Hamilton / My name is Alexander Hamilton / And there's a million things I haven't done / But just you wait...'

We meet the guy, the epicentre of it all, less than three minutes into the show. There's a partially engraved rule in theatre that exposition in the opening number is a killer for audiences. You have to set the scene, as I said earlier, to ease people in. There's no overture here, no curtain. We learn the nooks and crannies of the set as we sit down, no secrets hidden within those wooden beams – because Miranda loves getting straight to the point.

This is a story about big ideas, big dreams and huge historical importance and we've a lot to get through. The real killer would have been to start with a scene-setter and then introduce the history lesson later on.

Though known to be a hip-hop musical, this number is actually all on the note. Nothing is rapped – this is Miranda bringing the forms together. A disciple of all the theatre greats, not only Richard Rodgers, whose building his show still occupies, but also importantly Lionel Bart (see page 11). He has stated before that *Oliver!* is the main inspiration behind his writing, the best example of the form. I have to agree with him – there's no flab in that show, nothing that doesn't drive the characters and the story along.

'We are waiting in the wings for you.' The whole company joins onstage – a suggestion of a Greek chorus; as we get further into the meat of the song, they're singing 'In New York you can be a new man' while Hamilton repeats his portentous 'Just you wait', two huge statements and ideas that drill into your brain. We're being implored to ingest these words, and even if the still wriggling audience ('MY PHONE, MY PHONE, I CAN'T TURN IT OFF') might not realise it, the power of the music and the insistence of the orchestration has already secured the stakes of the action and the import of the story.

So, in a brilliant mix of musical styles we have a rap song that isn't rapped, that rattles through decades of history and pins us to our seats – all delivered by a diverse young cast celebrating the ability to dream, to climb up the ladder that signified everything the man was about. 'What's your name, man?'

'Alexander Hamilton.' M

Hamilton is at the Victoria Palace Theatre until 29 March 2025 and touring the UK until 25 October 2025 – visit hamiltonmusical.com; the filmed version of the original Broadway production is available to watch on Disney+

A song that rattles through decades of history and pins us to our seats

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan / 2020 Lin-Manuel Miranda and Nevis Productions, LLC. All Rights Reserved

Broadway Bulletin

This year's Broadway openings have been full of curveballs ahead of the Tony nominations. **Matt Wolf** explores this busy season and reflects how the Tonys and Oliviers don't always align

The race to the finish line at this year's Tony Awards is worthy of a show in and of itself. Every Broadway season culminates in a flurry of activity as shows jostle one another for the accolades that will help see them through another season or two.

Those of us with long memories will never forget the 1982 Tonys in which the frontrunner – *Dreamgirls* – was pipped to the post by the late arrival of *Nine*, which to this day rivals *Dreamgirls* as one of the most exciting Broadway stagings ever. It was to the utmost misfortune of Michael Bennett, the genius begetter of *Dreamgirls*, to bump up against the wizardry of *Nine*'s director Tommy Tune in the same season.

April has seen 14 new plays and musicals vying for attention, resulting in three different dates where two shows were opening the same day – a New York phenomenon that is virtually unheard of but is facilitated by lengthy preview periods that, for musicals especially, can stretch out over a month or so.

Usually, it's reasonably clear by this point which musicals look most likely to curry favour, but the current season has thrown no shortage of curveballs that promise to keep things interesting right up to the Tony Award wire: the ceremony falls on 16 June, which is later than I can ever recall. About the only near certainty, which itself is odd by comparison with this same musical's West End fate, is that *Back to the Future*, which won the 2022 Olivier for Best New Musical and is still running at the Adelphi Theatre in the West End, will be lucky to make the Tony cut at all. Its optimal chances lie in the technical categories and in Englishman Hugh Coles's career-making supporting performance as George McFly,

Above/left Tony Award contenders Maleah Joi Moon (Hell's Kitchen) and Kelli O'Hara (Days of Wine and Roses)

which has galvanised Broadway as it previously did London's West End.

What then of the late-season onslaught? (If Justin Peck's *Illinoise* wins, it will be the first dance show to take the top prize since *Contact* in 2000.) With the nominees yet to be named at the time of writing, the only certainty is that the ultimate trophy-bearer is anyone's guess. I mean, in a Broadway climate in which *Cabaret* can get mixed reviews in the same production from Rebecca Frecknall that previously won seven Oliviers in London, it's safe to say that all bets are off.

Was New York not yet ready for a fresh take on a show that proved an instant classic at its 1966 Broadway premiere, directed by Hal Prince, before giving way to the acclaimed Sam Mendes/Rob Marshall revival that had two separate sustained New York runs? Who's to say, beyond noting that the varied reception to Eddie Redmayne's marionette-like Emcee would appear to have paved the way for Jonathan Groff to win his first Tony for the season's critical darling, *Merrily We Roll Along* – as with *Cabaret*, a New York production that was first seen in London, though *Merrily*, of course, began as a Broadway flop whereas *Cabaret* has always been the stuff of legend.

One could argue that the musical revival category is more exciting, for a change, than the new musical face-off. Further competitors include the first-ever Broadway revival of *The Wiz*, whose turbo-charged energy the first time round I still recall from my stagestruck adolescence, and Tony winner Des McAnuff returning more than 30 years later to the sonic well of *The Who's Tommy*, a glorious concert-turned-aural-experience that simply must be experienced loud. (No idea whether earplugs are provided this time round.)

As for whether *The Outsiders* will prevail over *The Great Gatsby* – two shows adapted from iconic, if very different, literary sources – that's as difficult to predict as which of two commercial upgrades from the Public Theater, *Suffs* or *Hell's Kitchen*, will garner greater Tony kudos.

Initial headwinds would seem to favour *Hell's Kitchen* and its young star, Maleah Joi Moon, whose Broadway debut playing Alicia Keys has made her a Tony frontrunner alongside Broadway veteran Kelli O'Hara.

The latter's transfixing performance in *Days of Wine and Roses* is at a disadvantage for the simple reason that the Adam Guettel musical about alcoholism did disappointing business and closed early.

Water for Elephants and *The Notebook* – two other novels-turned-shows – are playing opposite one another on 45th Street and both have their adherents, the latter boasting amongst its cast the wonderful Maryann Plunkett, who last won a Tony opposite Robert Lindsay in *Me and My Girl* in 1987.

However the winds blow, one hopes that due attention will be paid to two momentous events away from the Tony spotlight. The 1997 Best Musical recipient, *Titanic*, is getting a two-week concert airing at City Center Encores! with a dream cast including Ramin Karimloo, Bonnie Milligan, Judy Kuhn and Chip Zien, while 2020 Tony winner Aaron Tveit brings his *Moulin Rouge!*-honed vocal chops to the small-t 'tony' (or 'classy', for our non-American readers) environs of the Cafe Carlyle for a residency from 11 June.

To co-opt a song of Tveit, with regard to this year's open Tonys season: the winners will be what they are meant to be, 'come what may', and many a contender, I'm sure, will find themselves living the lyrics to that. M

Discover the complete list of Tony nominees, revealed on 30 April, by visiting musicalsmagazine.com

One could argue that the musical revival category is more exciting, for a change, than the new musical face-off

PHOTOGRAPHY: Joan Marcus

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Keeping Score A Chorus Line

Orchestrator **Jason Carr** on how the brainchild of director-choreographer Michael Bennett, with an outstanding score by first-time Broadway composer Marvin Hamlisch, became an evergreen classic

Traditionally, the producer has been the driving force behind most musicals (Florenz Ziegfeld, Theresa Helburn, David Merrick *et al*). However, the 1960s saw the emergence of the director-choreographer as the pre-eminent figure. Jerome Robbins, Gower Champion and Bob Fosse were the towering talents, and in the 1970s a new force emerged – Michael Bennett. Perhaps the most crucial step in his development from plain choreographer to full 'conceived, choreographed and directed by' billing was his collaboration on the first two shows of the Harold Prince/Stephen Sondheim oeuvre – *Company* and *Follies*, both of which eschewed a traditional linear plot and, in the case of *Follies*, used showbusiness as a metaphor for the disappointments underlying the American Dream.

As an ex-chorus dancer himself, Bennett felt that the dancing chorus was generally undervalued and underpaid, and so conceived a show set at a 'cattle call' open audition, drawn from interviews with dancers. He persuaded Joseph Papp to fund the R&D at the Public Theater, away from the commercial pressures of Broadway, where there was more room to experiment with form. The work was already proceeding, with book writer Nicholas Dante shaping the dancers' testimonies, before the songwriters were chosen. Composer Marvin Hamlisch (one-time rehearsal pianist for *Funny Girl*) had found Hollywood success with *The Way We Were* but was yet to write for Broadway. Lyricist Edward Kleban was very much only an emerging talent (as later documented in the bio-musical *A Class Act*). A second book writer, James Kirkwood, later joined the team.

The score that emerged is perhaps best represented by the extended sequence 'Hello Twelve'. Though it incorporates traditional song elements, it is a patchwork of songlets, often a direct setting of the dancers' reminiscences. It includes perhaps the most gorgeous melody in the evening, Maggie's 'Please take this message to mother from me', rendered all the more poignant by being juxtaposed with memories of dysfunctional parents and teenage sexual anxiety.

Above/below Nikolai Foster's striking 2021 production at Leicester Curve

'At the Ballet' similarly counterpoints the youthful, stagestruck dreams with the tawdriness of real life, and contains multiple climaxes to rival *The Sleeping Beauty*'s 'Rose Adagio' – who can forget Maggie's top E soaring ecstatically as three trumpets blaze away?

Hamlisch was keen to insert a song that could have life outside the theatre. Kleban was less struck, but 'What I Did for Love' certainly delivered, although it requires thoughtful presentation not to jump out in context.

Many hands worked on the show. It was hard to get one orchestrator to commit to a project that paid below Broadway rates and was not expected to be a hit. The billing credits Bill Byers, Hershey Kay and Jonathan Tunick, though we know that Harold Wheeler, Philip J Lang, Larry Wilcox and Ralph Burns all also contributed, overseen by musical director and vocal arranger Don Pippin. Though today a 17-piece orchestra sounds extravagant, at the time it was below par, lacking the usual string section.

Amazingly, the group effort was extremely harmonious. I was lucky enough to sit in the orchestra pit for the 2013 London revival, where I wept openly on multiple occasions, particularly for Wheeler's extraordinary work on 'The Music and the Mirror'.

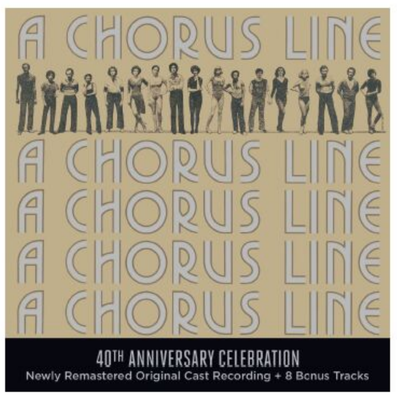
The two versions of 'One', the diegetic song the auditionees learn for the show, are fascinating. The first 'rehearsal' version brilliantly counterpoints the song with the complicated thoughts racing through the dancers' minds, surrounding the generic harmonies with unexpected, eerie colours. The Finale, with its gold costumes and thrilling brass fills, should be a triumphant celebration of the final auditionees' success, but is also chilling as the personalities we've got to know are submerged into, yes, the chorus line.

Of course, we now know that in 1983 it became the longest-running Broadway show (now the seventh), celebrated with a legendary performance including 332 veteran cast members – oh, for a film of *that* night! It remains a surprisingly poignant and moving work, where youthful energy and optimism is contrasted with a harsh, unforgiving world of commercial imperatives and job insecurity. One man's vision corralling a great collective endeavour – Michael Bennett for president, anyone? M

A Chorus Line tours the UK from 28 June to 5 October – for tickets and information, visit achoruslinetour.com

Jason Carr's listening recommendation

A Chorus Line
40th Anniversary Celebration (remastered edition of 1975 Original Broadway Cast Recording)
Wayne Cilento, Priscilla Lopez, Donna McKechnie, Pamela Blair *et al*
Masterworks Broadway
Released 2015



Discounting the 1985 film soundtrack (not without interest), we have two Broadway contenders. The 2006 revival is more (but not fully) complete than the 1975 original, but the OBC remains superlative, its 40th Anniversary reissue remastered with tempting bonus tracks performed by Hamlisch and Kleban.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

A SONG OF SONGS VISITS PARK THEATRE

For a multicultural take on Musical Theatre, *A Song of Songs* – a play with music written, performed and directed by Israeli-born, California-based artist Ofra Daniel (pictured) – plays at the Park Theatre, London, until 15 June. First performed in San Francisco in 2017, the show features a world music score (with a band that includes flamenco guitar and klezmer violin), Middle Eastern harmonics and a story of passion and awakening.

Daniel plays a young wife trapped in a loveless marriage who embarks on a passionate love affair, finding herself on an unexpected journey of personal empowerment.

The international cast includes Joaquin Pedro Valdes, soon to be seen in Stephen Schwartz's *The Baker's Wife* at the Menier Chocolate Factory – a show which, while very different stylistically, sounds as if it might have quite a bit in common thematically with *A Song of Songs*.

Pop-tastic Cruella casting for Dalmatians tour

Kym Marsh, and Faye Tozer (pictured) – alumni of the pop groups Hear'Say and Steps respectively – are sure to deserve a round of 'appaws' when they share the role of the fabulously evil Cruella de Vil in the tour of *101 Dalmatians*.

Marsh's theatre credits include *Saturday Night Fever*, *Fatal Attraction* (playing another role immortalised onscreen by Glenn Close) and the Take That musical *Greatest Days*. For 14 years, she played the role of Michelle Connor in *Coronation Street*, and she currently appears as Nicky Walters in *Waterloo Road*.

Tozer's stage appearances, meanwhile, include *42nd Street*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*. She was a finalist on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2018 (and, in fact, Marsh also did rather well, reaching the quarter final in 2022).

The musical version of Dodie Smith's 1956 shaggy dog tale, by Douglas Hodge (music and lyrics), Johnny McKnight (book) and Zinnie Harris (stage adaptation), was the first newly commissioned musical from Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in 2022. *Musicals*' Marianka Swain enjoyed the 'zany, graphic novel-style elements' of the show. For the tour, Bill Buckhurst (*The Time Traveller's Wife*) takes over directorial duties from Timothy Sheader. It'll be interesting to see how this version hits the 'spot' in comparison to the original!

The tour begins at the New Wimbledon Theatre on 22 June and continues until 5 January 2025. Cruella casting from 12 November onwards is to be announced.

For tickets, venues and more information, visit 101dalmatians.co.uk

Lloyd Webber is given highest knighthood honour

Buckingham Palace has announced that Andrew Lloyd Webber is being made a Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. This new recognition of the seven-time Olivier Award-winning composer of *The Phantom of the Opera and Sunset Boulevard* will be celebrated at a ceremony at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle.

This is a particularly prestigious honour as there can only be a maximum of 24 Knight Companions at one time – there are currently 21, including Lloyd Webber.

Lloyd Webber was knighted in 1992 and subsequently given a life peerage in the 1997 New Year's Honours. As of summer 2024, the composer's full official name will be The Right Honourable Lord Lloyd-Webber KG.

The celebrated composer was delighted by the announcement: 'I am humbled, grateful and, quite frankly, staggered to have been made a Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter by His Majesty King Charles III,' he said. 'This is the greatest honour of my life.'

SONDHEIM 'OLD FRIENDS' TRIBUTE SET TO PLAY ON BROADWAY IN 2025

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends is set to transfer to Broadway in 2025 after its West End run at the Gielgud Theatre.

Following a stint from 8 February to 9 March at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, the Manhattan Theatre Club will present the revue at the Samuel J Friedman Theatre in New York on 25 March. Bernadette Peters and Lea Salonga (pictured) will return, with further casting still to be announced.

After a one-night concert in 2022 (selling out both the Sondheim Theatre and the Prince Edward Theatre where it was live-streamed), Cameron Mackintosh, who devised the show, announced it would relocate to the Gielgud for a 16-week run in 2023/2024. In his review, *Musicals*' Matt Wolf said the show was 'a dazzling array of talent who understand this work to their bones'.

It certainly seems apt that the tribute show created in memory of Sondheim is heading not only to the home of the many musicals featured in the show, but also to the home of the great maestro himself.

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends is set to open on Broadway on 25 March 2025 – for more information and tickets, visit manhattantheatreclub.com

NEW WRITING AT SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE CONTINUES TO SURGE

Two new musicals can be seen at Southwark Playhouse, London, this summer. One exclamation mark isn't enough for *Fun at the Beach Romp-Bomp-A-Lomp!!* – which plays at Borough's 'The Large' until 22 June. By Brandon Lambert and Martin Landry, it is intriguingly billed as '*Grease* meets *The Hunger Games*', in which competitors fight to the death to become King or Queen of the Beach. The show is directed by Mark Bell (*The Play That Goes Wrong*).

Also at Southwark Playhouse Borough, *Dorian: The Musical*, based on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, will be performed from 4 July to 10 August. With music/lyrics by Joe Evans and book/direction by Linnie Reedman (co-founders of theatre company Ruby in the Dust), this new interpretation of the Gothic classic is a rock-inspired queer fairy tale; Alfie Friedman plays the title role.

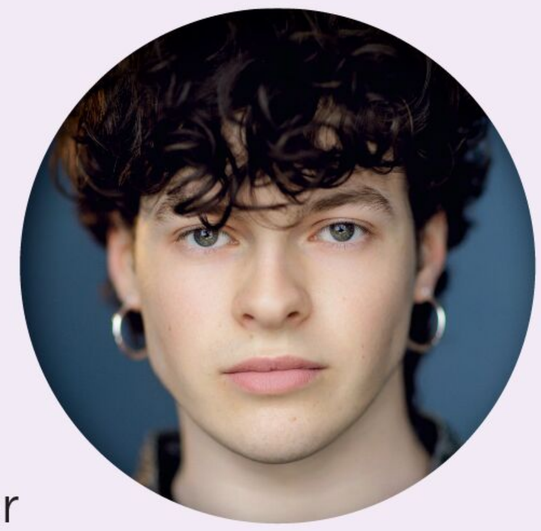
Meanwhile, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, previously at Southwark Playhouse, makes its West End debut in October; and *Cable Street* (pictured) – with a score which, wrote *Musicals*' Aliya Al-Hassan, 'reflects the cultural melting pot of Cable Street' – will have a second run at Southwark Playhouse, this time in its Elephant space, in September.

For tickets, visit southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith / Danny Kaan / Jane Hobson

Rising Star

Jo Foster



Soon to star in Marlow and Moss's Why Am I So Single?, Jo Foster is treading new ground as a non-binary performer

Taking it in their stride

In the three years since graduating from ArtsEd in 2021, Jo Foster has firmly made their mark on the West End scene. Their momentum shows no signs of slowing as they prepare to play Oliver in Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss's much-anticipated new musical *Why Am I So Single?* at the Garrick Theatre this summer.

Homegrown talent

Foster's love of theatre was nurtured from a young age, not only by their family but also by the close-knit local amateur theatre community in Bolton, Lancashire. 'I loved singing and dancing – it was something I was good at. I was obsessed with *Annie* (because she's obviously a camp diva!) and loved a bit of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *Oliver!* Those were the classics that I watched on DVD constantly – I remember thinking, "I want to do that". At eight, my mum and dad sent me to drama classes. It was a way to get me out of the house. I was bullied a lot as a child and theatre let me escape by going onstage and doing what I liked to do. I made lifelong friends there.'

Virtual education

The path to drama school was therefore an inevitable one but Foster's experience at ArtsEd was heavily affected by the Covid pandemic of 2020-01. 'I went and looked round ArtsEd [in Chiswick, London] before I applied. It felt so classy and I thought, "I'm gonna be here one day" – and so I worked hard, auditioned and made it happen. It's what I wanted in terms of training, but then, when the pandemic hit, half of that training had to be completely online. This is wild to think about now – we could only allow six agents to see our third-year shows and our showcases had to be done virtually. It was very bittersweet as we didn't get that big final send-off but, looking back, I wouldn't be where I am now without those years at drama school.'

The road to the West End

Within a year of graduating, Foster came full circle when they were cast in *Rent* at the Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester – a venue not far from home. Soon after, they made their National Theatre debut in the Rufus Norris-directed *Hex*, which was a real eye-opener. 'The Olivier stage is so big, it's insane – we walked out there, and it felt like such an accomplishment after how tough our drama school experience was.' Soon after, Foster collaborated for a second time with director Luke Sheppard, making their West End debut in *& Juliet*, and then again in *Just For One Day* at the Old Vic.

'Working with Luke was just amazing – he really allows you to have fun and be creative. I've been able to bring myself to the characters and that's something I never thought I'd be able to do.'

Accepting and embracing their gender expression

Foster was cast in *SIX* co-creator Lucy Moss's production of *Legally Blonde* at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in 2022 – the production received a lot of attention due to several cuts and changes from the original, particularly the freedom afforded to many of the actors' gender identities. Not only was this production Foster's first encounter with Moss but it was also instrumental in accepting their own gender expression. 'We all really came together, as we did get a bit of hate from places like Twitter – and it wasn't about the work, they were personal attacks. During my time on that show, I started to come to terms with my non-binary identity – I felt less afraid in the loving environment we had as a cast. I remember going to Lucy and saying that I didn't feel comfortable playing he/him roles – she sat me down and we had an amazing convo. She made me feel so held and safe. We talked through changes to my part to make me feel more comfortable. I appreciated that so much. But in the wider industry, casting can be a nightmare for non-binary actors. It's so easy to make changes to roles so they fit for non-binary actors – I'm so grateful to my agent because he always asks: "Does it matter what this person looks like and what their gender is?" Nine times out of 10, it doesn't.'

Rocking out: In Just For One Day, directed by Luke Sheppard, at the Old Vic

Research and development

Following *Legally Blonde*, Moss mentioned a project in the works, but little did Foster expect to be getting the call to take part in the R&D for Moss's next musical with Toby Marlow. 'The weird thing is, when you're doing workshops and R&Ds, you don't really think about the future – as an actor you're hired for that time, so once it's over you move on. I did the readthrough with Lizzy Connolly; we understood it and really had fun with it. I got asked to do it again at the workshop at Sadler's Wells and it was so amazing to put it on its feet and see how far it had come. The material is so funny, it's so relatable and so clever – there isn't anything else like it. I can't wait to take it to the West End – it's going to be insane!'

As told to Jonathan Whiting

Why Am I So Single? plays at the Garrick Theatre from 27 August to 13 February 2025 – visit thegarricktheatre.co.uk; read our cover interview with Marlow and Moss next issue

PHOTOGRAPHY: Dujonna Gift-Simms (Shot by Dujonna) / Manuel Harlan

It's in front of you! Gearing up for panto season 2024

Too early to be talking about panto? Oh no it isn't! At least, not when Musical Theatre stars of this calibre have been announced.

The London Palladium panto is famous for its glitzy and innuendo-filled offerings. Playing the title role in *Robin Hood* at the venue this year is Julian Clary, who's sure to look fetching in tights. Singer and presenter Jane McDonald co-stars as Maid Marion. Fancy footwork is guaranteed from cover star Charlie Stemp as Alan-a-Dale and, in her panto debut, Marisha Wallace (*Guys & Dolls*) is cast against type as the villainous Sheriff of Nottingham. Tosh Wanogho-Maud (*Ain't Too Proud*) also joins as Little John.

In East London, the doyenne of dames Clive Rowe (pictured) returns to the Hackney Empire to direct and star in *Dick Whittington*

and his Cat. It's a busy time for Rowe, who plays Eddie in *Sister Act* until 8 June (see last issue's Opening Night interview) before starring in the Menier Chocolate Factory's production of Stephen Schwartz's *The Baker's Wife* (opening 6 July).

Meanwhile, celebrating panto in the summer is The Pantomime Awards 2024, organised by the UK Pantomime Association in association with Stagecoach, which will take place on 18 June at G Live in Guildford. In seeking the fairest productions in the UK, the 70 judges visited 259 venues, attending some 728 performances. That's an awful lot of dames, beanstalks and glass slippers!

Dame Judi Dench launches £600k appeal

Stalwart of the stage Dame Judi Dench has launched a fundraising appeal for brand-new state-of-the-art rehearsal facilities at The Mill at Sonning.
The £600,000 appeal will fund a new rehearsal block, band room and offices at the riverside theatre based near Reading.

The 'Dame Judi Afternoon' to launch the appeal was hosted by actor-writer Simon Williams (pictured, centre, next to Dench) and billed as a celebration of the actress's seven decades-long career.

Filled with speeches and anecdotes, the event's highlight was Dench's recital of Viola's soliloquy from *Twelfth Night*, which received a standing ovation. The occasion was one of many planned over the next year to raise the six-figure sum.

For the 42 years since its inception, the UK's only dinner theatre has gone from strength to strength, not only housing touring plays and musicals but also widely acclaimed homegrown productions. In his review of the venue's 2023 production of *Gypsy*, *Musicals*' Mark Brown enthusiastically described The Mill as 'an extraordinary venue which is located in a beautiful old wooden mill house, complete with functioning waterwheel – an ideal place to stage a well-polished production'.

TWO STRANGERS SHOW CAPTIVATES AUDIENCES IN ITS WEST END DEBUT

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York), penned by Jim Barne and Kit Buchan, opened at North West London's Kiln Theatre in November 2023 (see our review in Issue 7). Its previous outing was as *The Season* in 2019, at the Royal & Derngate, Northampton, and New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, supported by the 2018 Stiles + Drewe Mentorship Award; it was a recipient of *The Stage* Debut Award in 2020.

The West End transfer opened at the Criterion Theatre on 4 April and has now been extended through the summer to 31 August.

The 'two strangers' are played by *Dear Evan Hansen's* Sam Tutty (hear our 'Edward Seckerson Meets...' podcast) and our Rising Star from last issue, Dujonna Gift (*Hamilton*).

Musicals' Editor Sarah Kirkup attended press night and came away delighted, concluding that the show is 'a heartening reminder that homegrown, grassroots Musical Theatre in the UK is alive and kicking, so long as producers continue to support these smaller shows'.

This year also marks the Criterion's 150th anniversary. To celebrate, the theatre is offering 150 free tickets a week to audience members aged 12 to 21 until 28 June. A gala will be held on 24 June to raise funds to continue the scheme for a further 20 weeks.
For more information and tickets, visit twostrangersthemusical.com

FRANCES RUFFELLE TO STAR AT THE TURBINE THEATRE

Theatre legend Frances Ruffelle is set to star in a revival of *Closer to Heaven* at the Turbine Theatre in Battersea, London. Many will know Ruffelle not only as the original Dinah in *Starlight Express* (you can read our feature on page 30) but also as the original Éponine in *Les Misérables*, where her famously gritty yet charming voice saw her win a Tony in 1987 for Best Featured Actress in a Musical.

Featuring the music of the Pet Shop Boys and a book by renowned playwright Jonathan Harvey, *Closer To Heaven* is part of the theatre's season celebrating queer love. This May and June, the venue will be transformed into 'Vic's Club' offering an immersive experience that promises to be 'anything but old-fashioned'.
Closer To Heaven runs from 21 May to 30 June – for tickets, visit theturbinetheatre.com

BYMT celebrates 20th anniversary

British Youth Music Theatre (BYMT) is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a gala at The Other Palace, London, on 8 July. Since 2004, BYMT, which provides training focused on new writing, has commissioned 120 original musicals and worked with more than 16,000 young people.

The event will be hosted by alumnus Lewis Cornay (*The SpongeBob Musical*; other former members, including Grace Mouat (*Mean Girls*), Kayleigh McKnight (*SIX*) and Luke Bayer (*Head Over Heels*), will perform a selection of the BYMT's greatest hits, alongside the current Young Company.

Additionally, the BYMT Convention: Careers in New Music Theatre will take place during the day on 8 July, at the same venue, during which Musical Theatre professionals will share their expertise and experience.

The Other Palace is soon to be home to Jack Godfrey's *Babies*, which started as a BYMT show in 2021.

BYMT's 20th anniversary season began in April with *Animal Farm;* other shows will include *All Growed Up*, *Unbound*, *Wonderland in Alice*, *The Power of Camelot* and *When We Strike*.
For information and tickets, visit britishyouthmusictheatre.org

PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Senior / Andreas Lambis / Mark Senior

Charlie's 'TOO DARN HOT'

The temperature has been rising around this London-born performer since his leading-role debut in Half a Sixpence in 2016. Now, hot on the heels of his Olivier-nominated turn as Bobby in Crazy for You, Charlie Stemp is starring in Kiss Me, Kate, another Golden Age show – because, finds **Sarah Crompton**, he's been dreaming of these classic musicals since childhood

'It's not until you listen to Cole Porter or George Gershwin being played with a full orchestra that you really know the meaning of wanting to dance,' says Charlie Stemp, with a broad grin. 'When we were launching the show, the band started playing 'Too Darn Hot' and I had to be told three times to stop moving. I just couldn't help myself – it's so gorgeous.'

His enthusiasm for the Cole Porter classic *Kiss Me, Kate* is pouring over a Zoom call from Belsize Park. The cast of Bartlett Sher's revival, which opens at the Barbican Theatre in June, is rehearsing in a gracious old council building. 'With sprung floors!' Stemp adds, with some excitement. 'For a dancer, that's a must-have. We won't get that onstage with a revolve, so I'm enjoying it while I can.'

It's hard not to feel that Stemp is the kind of character who enjoys just about everything. With his shock of curly hair and his wide grin, he seems born to play the kind of roles that have made his name – the irrepressible Arthur Kipps in *Half a Sixpence*, good-hearted Bert in *Mary Poppins*, the energetic wannabe song-and-dance man Bobby in *Crazy for You*.

All three won him Olivier Award nominations. In British Musical Theatre terms, his talent is a rare one. He can sing, he can dance, he can act – and he excels in shows that recall the genre's Golden Age, lavish spectaculars full of tunes that became popular hits. Yet Stemp's journey to this place is one that still surprises him.

'I don't think I had an end goal or idea. It was always more just that I really liked singing and dancing and acting. I liked showing off. So it was just like following a bright light – you don't really know where it goes, but you do know that it's the right way.

'If you'd told me when I was 18, on the first day of my professional career at the Orchard Theatre in Dartford, that I'd be coming back to the same place in 12 years' time to promote my ninth West End contract, that this would be my life, I wouldn't believe it. I feel so fortunate that I've had the opportunity, the luck and the hard work in me. I feel very grateful.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Johan Persson / Kiss Me, Kate (also main image previous spread)

Above/right Charlie Stemp has found a natural home in classics Half a Sixpence, Crazy for You and Kiss Me, Kate (with Georgina Onuorah)

His story begins as a hyperactive boy growing up in South London, excelling at sports such as football, judo and rugby, but still with energy to burn. His mother – ‘Bless her’ – set him off on a career as a child model, starring in television advertisements ‘just to be creative’. ‘I think it was for me to have something to do,’ he says. ‘I had too much energy. If you google “Tamagotchi advertisements” and scroll down far enough, you’ll eventually see me.’

By secondary school, he was struggling to fit his personality to academic life, and ended up at a local theatre school, the now defunct Belcanto London Academy in Eltham. It was there that he began to dance. ‘It wasn’t something I wanted to do in all honesty. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like the ballet tights and jock straps, but then when I was about 13, I suddenly got it. Because I was so energetic, I could get elevation on my jumps that others couldn’t, and the older I got, the more I realised I had the strength that I could add to it. All the sport I did when I was growing up added to the balance.

‘It gave me the physical enjoyment of sport, but it also became the thing through which I was able to express myself the most. In art, there’s nothing more enjoyable than doing something that just happens in the moment, and dance has always been a way for me to express that side of myself.’

His original dream was to be in Matthew Bourne’s New Adventures company – and he did once audition for a role in *Swan Lake*. ‘I went to the front of the class, and I tell you, I said to myself, “I’ve got that job.” I thought I’d booked it.’

He hadn’t. ‘I later found out that Matthew thought my feet were terrible.’ He adopts a sad expression. ‘So yeah, I was pretty gutted about that at the time because I’d grown up watching *Swan Lake* and especially *The Car Man*.’

He eventually met Bourne when he appeared in the 2019 West End revival production of *Mary Poppins* opposite Zizi Strallen in the title role, a musical Bourne co-choreographed with Stephen Mear. Did he raise his failed audition? ‘He was very polite and he said he remembered me. And then we moved the conversation on.’

That audition came after he had completed his training at Laine Theatre Arts in Epsom and landed his first job in the chorus of *Wicked*. By then he had learnt to sing, which also stood him in good stead when he joined the international tour of *Mamma Mia!* ‘I tore the cartilage in my knee and couldn’t go to dance class so the teachers at Laines suggested I pushed singing while I was injured. I did three lessons a day for about three months and came off the back of it good enough to sing in an ensemble, but from there I loved it enough to take a lot of lessons.’

His passion for the musicals of the Golden Age came later, too. As a child, he would watch films such as *Singin’ in the Rain* over and over again – and he was obsessed with Dick Van Dyke singing ‘Me Ol’ Bamboo’ in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

But he only discovered the joy of the classic musicals live onstage after he left college.

'One of the main things I'm starting to realise is that the issue with theatre is that you can't afford it at a younger age. How are you supposed to? I don't want to get into a rant, but I would have had so much more of an understanding of theatre if I could have afforded theatre.'

As it was, it was only when he was performing professionally and meeting other actors that his voyage of discovery began. 'I went to watch some friends in *West Side Story* when they were on tour and that was the first example of old-school, glory days of Musical Theatre that I remember watching. It was amazing. I remember feeling this is just so mind-blowingly beautiful, but I felt sad and disjointed because it didn't feel something I could be a part of.'

He pauses, pensive for once. But suddenly the smile is back. 'I would encourage everyone to watch a musical. Or be in them. Personally, I think being in them is better than watching them.'

He is now a total fan of the classics. 'Those shows don't apologise for a lack of context. They've got dream ballets!' he says, in mock amazement. 'You wouldn't get away with a dream ballet now. Those homages to a choreographer. There's one in *Guys and Dolls*, in *Oklahoma!* – and the same in *West Side Story*. Nowadays, you wouldn't see the cast of *SIX* getting a lot of dry ice onstage, changing the lights and suddenly start dancing. I love that side of things.'

But it wasn't Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Frank Loesser, who turned Stemp into a star. It was a new adaptation by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe (alongside revisions of David Heneker's original songs), with a book by Julian Fellowes, of the 1963 musical *Half a Sixpence*, originally conceived as a vehicle for British pop star Tommy Steele. The show, produced by Cameron Mackintosh, premiered at Chichester in 2016 with Stemp replacing the more established Bryan Dick who pulled out to appear in *Hobson's Choice*.

Stemp took the part of the cheeky chappie Arthur Kipps, whose fortunes are transformed by an inheritance, and made it his own.

Overnight, he was acclaimed as a new musical star. 'One of those fairy-tale performances that's the stuff of legend,' wrote the *Sunday Telegraph*, excitedly. I was at the premiere and vividly remember the warmth of his personality and the dazzle of his dancing. 'That night was a blur,' Stemp says. 'I didn't know what was going on. I think I was lucky enough to stay away from the idea that it was the most important moment of my professional life. But that's what it was.

I was given this chance by one of the most powerful people in Musical Theatre and I think one of the things that was so helpful to me was that I was a little bit clueless about the reality of the situation because I always try to go into everything with positivity, a sense of kindness and a sense of hard work. It wasn't something I was aware of until after. It was only when we went into the West End that I went, "OK, this is a big moment for me."'

He praises his director Rachel Kavanaugh and the cast for their support. But most of all, he is glad that he didn't win the Olivier that year. 'Not winning changed things,' he says at his characteristic rattle-gun speed. 'It sounds negative but it was positive. Andy Karl won [for *Groundhog Day*] and he totally deserved to. But because I didn't win but had been nominated, there was still a lot of talk about it.

'Not winning actually helped because the industry was intrigued to see what else I could do.' He draws breath. 'Also, I was too young and that could have made me arrogant. I would have felt I had completed something, whereas in reality I've learnt so much since then.'

> **Because I was so energetic, I could get elevation on my jumps that others couldn't**

What he actually learnt next was how to be in a Broadway musical, when he took fifth billing in the cast of *Hello, Dolly!* as store clerk Barnaby Tucker, alongside first Bernadette Peters and then Bette Midler as Dolly Levi. For a born-and-bred Londoner, who loves the parks and open spaces of his city, New York was quite a shock.

'New York is the most intense city in the world, so for someone like me who is "energy, energy, energy" all the time, I was pretty tired after the first week,' he admits. 'I had to change how I dealt with everything and the cast was so wonderful in helping me with that. It was glorious.' He marvelled at the artistry of Peters. 'She just came at everything with a truthfulness and an honesty,' he remembers. 'She was exceptional.'

Midler mothered him. 'It was a whirlwind three months. She's just Bette Midler, there's no other way of explaining it. She's so warm. I had this step where I did a big jump off a table and she was like, "Did they make you do this? Should I tell them to stop? Anytime you're tired, you let me know and we'll stop it".'

His love for daredevil antics continued into *Mary Poppins* where he tap danced upside down on the proscenium arch during 'Step in Time'. 'The hardest bit of that number is wearing the harness through the entire dance. It is the weight of a large child and you're wearing it through a massive, crazy, big tap number. By the time you get upside down, you're so tired you don't really have time to think about it. It's actually OK. Because your feet are on a platform, it just looks as if everybody else is upside down.'

He smiles. Stemp's pleasure in the physicality of dance, and in knockabout comedy, springs from his early influences. He adored the fun and precise slapstick humour in the films of Norman Wisdom, which his grandfather used to share with him. The physical comedy of Lee Evans was also an inspiration. 'He is an absolute icon. I've loved incorporating some of the moves I learnt from him into shows wherever I can,' he says.

He met Evans after the first night of *Crazy for You*, which brilliantly used his own skilful clowning. 'I don't get starstruck. I've always said, if I met Beyoncé, I'd just say hi. But Lee had such an impact on my life I couldn't get my words out at first. In the end, I just told him that I really appreciated everything he had done for the arts and said thank you. And he was just lovely. Then when he left, I turned to my mum, and we were both in tears.'

Gene Kelly, another hero, is the dancer to whom he is most often compared. 'I feel honoured, but it's no surprise because it's what I try to aspire to,' he explains. 'I loved Fred Astaire but he always had a calmness and an ease that doesn't sit well on my body. I'm more Gene. I'm always about energy, a little bit of technical jazz and flair, but also about just embracing your own enjoyment of dance. I think that's what I love about him.'

When he was working on *Crazy for You*, however, with the legendary director and choreographer Susan Stroman, she tried to bring out the Astaire influence. 'The Boss – that's what we called her – would say, "More Fred, less Gene". She'd say it all the time. I wanted to show the energy, but she wanted to show the calm and she's absolutely right. When you do it, it works. But it was tricky at first because I just wanted to jump into the song and dance and throw myself around.'

Top As Kipps in Sixpence: 'I'm a bit of a hoofer – the steps are different every time' **Above/right** As Bert in Poppins – daredevil antics were par for the course

PHOTOGRAPHY: Chris Nash / Johan Persson / Seamus Ryan

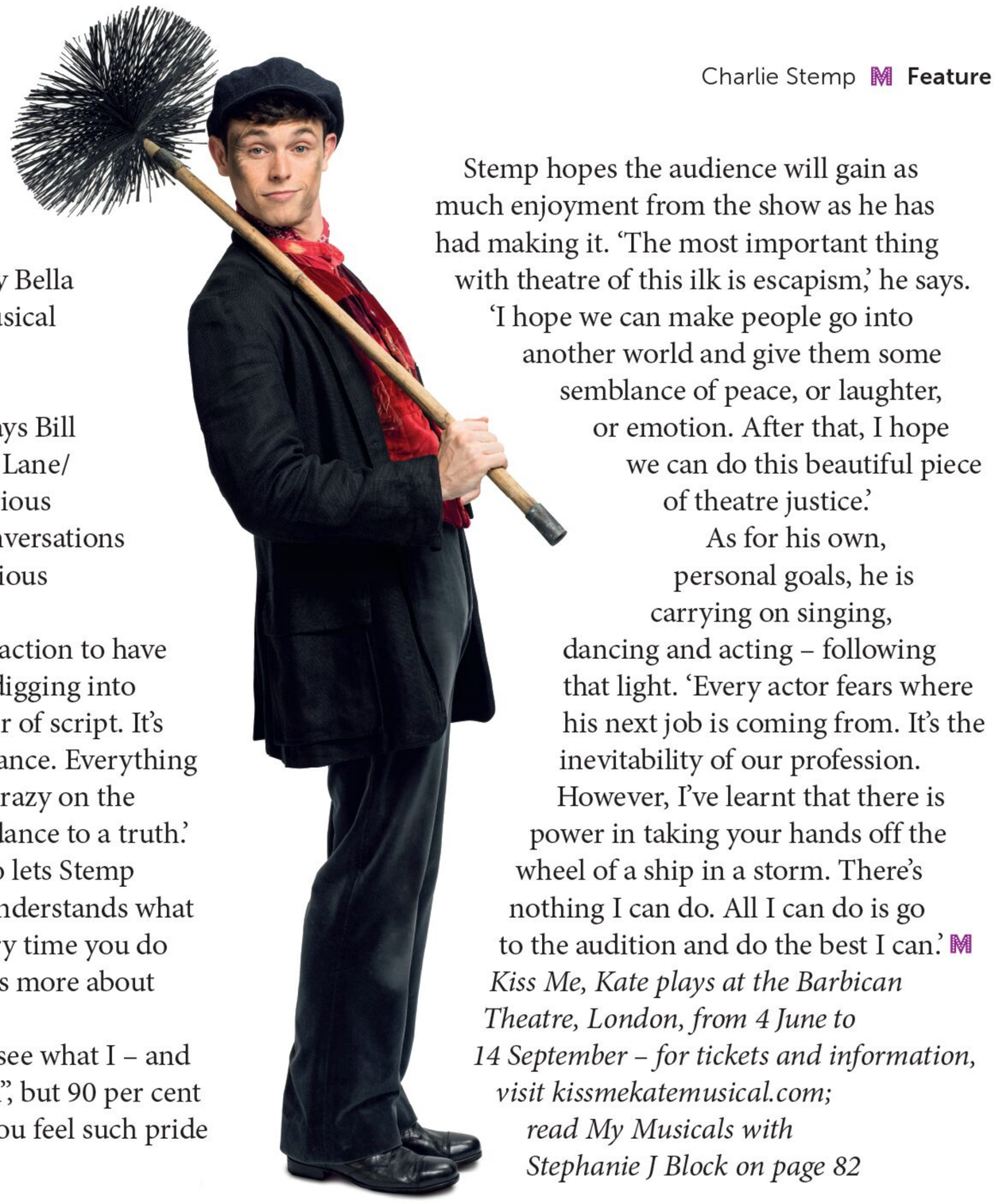
As he progresses in his career, Stemp is learning more and more about what it takes to make musicals speak to modern audiences. He has loved working with Bartlett Sher on *Kiss Me, Kate*, first seen in 1948, with music and lyrics by Cole Porter and a book by Bella and Samuel Spewack. The story wittily involves a production of a musical version of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and draws parallels between the action on- and offstage.

The cast is led by Adrian Dunbar and Stephanie J Block. Stemp plays Bill Calhoun/Lucentio opposite Georgina Onuorah as his girlfriend Lois Lane/Bianca. Bill's a gambler, and his addiction has already led to some serious discussions behind all the fun. 'We've had some really interesting conversations about his addiction, so from the moment the story starts there's a serious context that you want to make real and genuine.'

He loves the way Sher takes as his starting point the need for each action to have relevance. 'Why are we singing? Why are we dancing? We are really digging into why we are doing the things we do, so we have a completely new layer of script. It's so enjoyable to do a revival of an older musical and give it such relevance. Everything needs to come from a genuine place. If you are dancing, you can go crazy on the dance once you've established why you're dancing. It's wonderful to dance to a truth.'

It's the same working with choreographer Anthony Van Laast, who lets Stemp contribute ideas. 'I'm a bit of a hoofer in a tap sense, someone who understands what the beat needs to be, but all the steps are normally very different every time you do it. I can understand the rhythms in my head, but the dance element is more about creative movement.

'If I think I have a good idea, Anthony wants to see it, he wants to see what I – and the other dancers – can bring. Sometimes he says, "No, that's rubbish", but 90 per cent of the time he'll go, "Let's try it". The creative process feels so open. You feel such pride in just being able to help move something along.'



Stemp hopes the audience will gain as much enjoyment from the show as he has had making it. 'The most important thing with theatre of this ilk is escapism,' he says. 'I hope we can make people go into another world and give them some semblance of peace, or laughter, or emotion. After that, I hope we can do this beautiful piece of theatre justice.'

As for his own, personal goals, he is carrying on singing, dancing and acting – following that light. 'Every actor fears where his next job is coming from. It's the inevitability of our profession. However, I've learnt that there is power in taking your hands off the wheel of a ship in a storm. There's nothing I can do. All I can do is go to the audition and do the best I can.' M

Kiss Me, Kate plays at the Barbican Theatre, London, from 4 June to 14 September – for tickets and information, visit kissmekatemusical.com;

read My Musicals with Stephanie J Block on page 82

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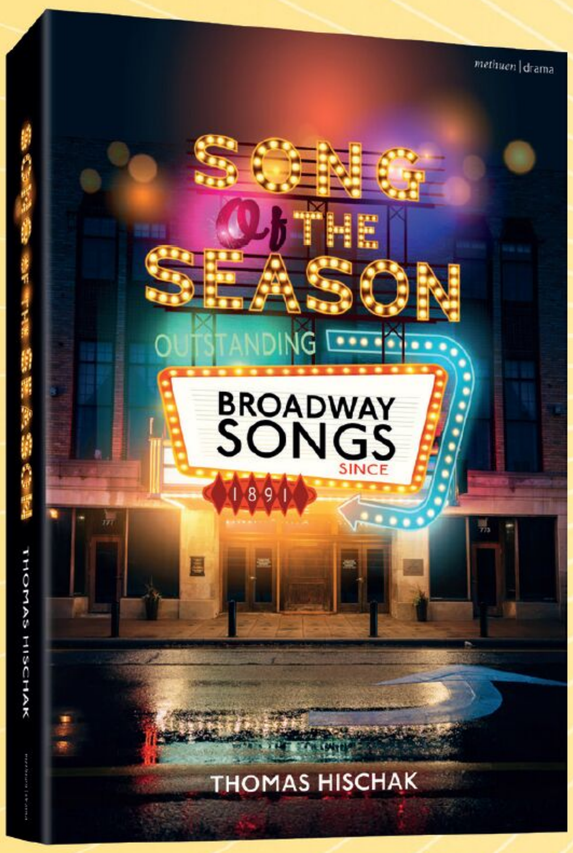

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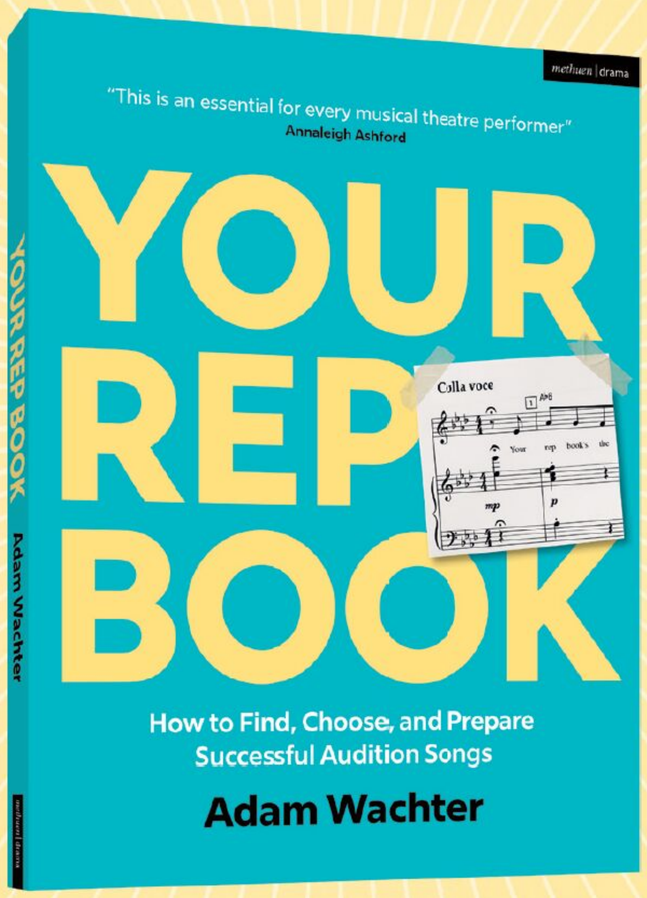

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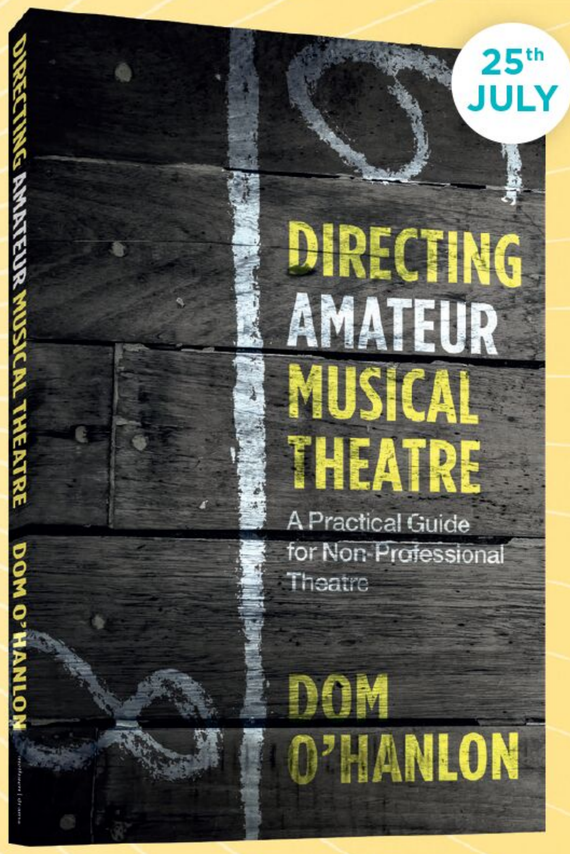

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The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Forty years after Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical on wheels first powered its way into the West End, a new production is transforming Wembley's Troubadour Theatre. Now radically updated, what will the impact of this revival be – both for die-hard 'Starlighters' and the uninitiated? **Sarah Kirkup** speaks to key creatives, including lyricist Richard Stilgoe and original director Trevor Nunn, to find out

PHOTOGRAPHY: All Bochum 2023/24 pictures (including p35 and p37) © Starlight Express/Detlef Overmann

'This is Control! This is Control!
All trains hear this! All trains hear this!
All trains to racing mode! All trains to racing mode!
Tonight is Race Night! Tonight is Race Night!'

The start of the opening track on the *Starlight Express* Original Cast Recording – the nasal American voice of Control, the repetitive quaver-triplet keyboard pattern, the heavy-rock guitar chords, the reverberating drums – instantly transports my eight-year-old self back to the pitch-black, cavernous interior of London's Apollo Victoria Theatre. The sky twinkles with stars, a giant mechanical bridge rises ominously, a wave of orchestral sound (16 in the pit!) crescendos, hitting me in the solar plexus – and then it's a blur of colour and light as performers on skates speed past, so close that I can almost reach out and touch them.

Starlight Express was the first West End musical I ever saw, and it set the bar pretty high in terms of its audacity and sheer spectacle. As the son of the show's lyricist Richard Stilgoe, Joe, wrote in his April/May column for *Musicals*: 'The whole cast was on skates, all of the time. It's utter madness, but as a child I loved. It. Maybe the reason why other shows didn't cause the same stir was because none of them involved roller skating next to my head at 30mph.'

> **Having a young creative team, including the brilliant director Luke Sheppard, is always the best approach for a revival on this scale**
>
> Richard Stilgoe, lyricist

Previous page Bochum 2023/24 **Left/above** London 1998

The West End show opened on 27 March 1984, with a score by Andrew Lloyd Webber that fused pop, R&B, rock 'n' roll, jazz, electronica and country and western. The groundbreaking, immersive set (40 years before the term 'immersive theatre' had even been coined) was by John Napier, who had previously worked with the show's director, Trevor Nunn, on *Cats*. Hot Gossip's Arlene Phillips was the choreographer. Overall, critics were unimpressed by the show's flimsy 'anthropomorphic trains' concept, its 'pastiche' score, and its 'paper-thin' plot. Audiences, on the other hand – and I count myself firmly in this camp – were delighted by the thrilling visual and audio effects which seemed almost futuristic (Electra's heavily synthesised song 'AC/DC', for example, performed by the androgynous electric train – 'a RuPaul engine way before its time', according to Richard Stilgoe). Not to mention the show's heartfelt story of triumph over adversity – or 'Cinderella on wheels', as Stilgoe puts it – with the Starlight Express replacing the Fairy Godmother, and Rusty the Steam Engine proving his worth on and off the track. 'It's meant to be nothing other than fun,' Lloyd Webber himself has said, 'but with a tiny heart of gold beating among all its trappings.'

The audiences won out: the show ran for 18 years at the Apollo Victoria, eventually closing in 2002 after more than 7,000 performances – making it, currently, the ninth longest-running theatrical production in West End history.

It also played on Broadway in 1987 (not entirely successfully, mainly because restrictions were imposed on Napier's immersive designs – 'the races were pathetic', recalls Nunn glumly), and in Las Vegas, Japan and Australia. There was a North American tour, and two UK tours (the most recent being in 2012). And let's not forget Bochum, where the show (sung in German) has been running continuously at the purpose-built Starlighthalle since 1988.

With a show so synonymous with the 1980s – Stilgoe's original lyrics included references to 'new' technology (Buffy the Buffet Car: 'My microwave is cooking / To warm you from inside') and cigarettes (Ashley the Smoking Car: 'I've tried to kick the habit / But my inside's used to tar') – it has necessarily received numerous updates and rewrites. One of the most significant was in 1992, resulting in a second cast recording – 'The New Starlight Express' – the following year. As for the Bochum production, Stilgoe recalls that a major rewrite occurred after Lloyd Webber's daughter Isabella went to see it for her 21st birthday in 2017. 'She said that the way women were treated in the show was disgraceful, and we thought: "Yes, she's right." Every girl is a coach or carriage and gets pulled around by the blokes.' By the time three concert-style workshop performances were given at London's The Other Palace in 2017, 'the women's roles had been strengthened vastly', recalls Stilgoe; it was this version that was then incorporated into Bochum. Further updating took place at a workshop at ArtsEd last year: 'Lots of those young people had heard the album but hadn't seen the show because they hadn't been born yet,' laughs Stilgoe. 'They'd say: "What does this bit mean?" so we'd have to make changes.'

When Stilgoe and Lloyd Webber first started collaborating on the show, the process involved the two of them sitting down to write the story – 'the description of the show, where each song would go, what sort of song, and the song's hook or title', explains Stilgoe – before Lloyd Webber went away to write the whole score. It was then given

PHOTOGRAPHY: All London 1998 pictures (including overleaf) taken from Souvenir Brochure, courtesy of a private collector; designed by Zarkowski Designs; Production Photographer James Bareham; © Copyright July 1998 The Really Useful Theatre Company Ltd

back to Stilgoe to 'fill in the words'. With some minor exceptions – Stilgoe asking for an extra quaver in the title song to match the syllables of 'Starlight Express', or dictating the rhythm for lines in the rap – Lloyd Webber was in charge. 'He's not just a composer, he's a producer,' says Stilgoe. 'He's thinking about what's going to work onstage.'

But as time has gone on, their working relationship has become more fluid. Explains Stilgoe: 'I might say, "If this tune we used earlier could be used again here…" That's the glory of Musical Theatre – you can repeat musical themes to remind the audiences of what's happening within the story.'

All this groundwork has been paving the way for the big reveal: a new version of *Starlight Express* opening in June, at a repurposed Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre renamed The Starlight Auditorium. Luke Sheppard (*The Little Big Things*, *& Juliet*) is directing, Tim Hatley (*Back to the Future*) is designing the set, and Gabriella Slade (*SIX*) is heading up costume design. But some of the original creatives are on board too, including Lloyd Webber, who, says Stilgoe, 'is reorchestrating it to bring it up to date. Andrew is listening to the younger generation [in this case, orchestrator Matthew Brind], just as he did for the Jamie Lloyd production of *Sunset Boulevard*. What a drum kit sounds like nowadays, for example, is different to the 1980s.' Phillips is returning as creative dramaturg, while Stilgoe is having fun reworking the lyrics. 'I've got lots of children and grandchildren, so they stop me from becoming a dinosaur,' he jokes, citing a new couplet he's just written for 'The Rap': 'Swipe to the left, swipe to the right / Who's going to be my date tonight?'

Stilgoe is enjoying working with 'the brilliant Luke Sheppard', explaining that having a young team, with fresh eyes and ears, is always the best approach for a revival on this sort of scale: 'They are all treating Andrew and me with great respect, and bringing us cups of tea. It's as if we're in a care home!' Pleasingly, some of the ArtsEd students involved in the workshop have gone on to be cast in the show – including Al Knott, the first female Greaseball. There's also, teases Stilgoe tantalisingly, a plot twist: 'The whole show is much "greener" than it was – make of that what you will!'

PHOTOGRAPHY: PA Images/Alamy Stock Photo

The original cast of Starlight Express on one of the show's 'props' at the first day of rehearsals at the Apollo Victoria; Nunn and Lloyd Webber are in the cab

Above London reunion **Directly below** Maurey Richards's Poppa, London 1998

To many 'Starlighters', these changes might seem alarming. Mark Davis, for example, the original dance captain who was with the show continuously for two years and later assisted with the Broadway and Bochum productions, is fervently hoping that the new show will be wonderful 'because it's a wonderful show' but also admits that he'd 'go back to the original in a heartbeat'. Davis recently organised a 40th anniversary reunion for London cast members, an event that I was privileged to attend. The collective joy and pride, not to mention nostalgia, felt by everyone there – from the original Rusty and Dinah, Ray Shell and Frances Ruffelle, to choreographer Phillips, to those who have since found new careers (like Rose Coutts-Smith, a Swing in 1985 who now works in couture) – was palpable. For everyone involved in the show, their lives would never be the same again – which perhaps explains their conflicting emotions: a giddy anticipation for the new production, and a deep loyalty to the original. But, as Shell admits: 'Evolving makes sense. Andrew was smart to listen to his daughter and the people around him – it needs to stay current. My own daughter was able to buy three seats [for the new show] from a woman who was so outraged by a female Greaseball that she sold her tickets. It's silliness.'

Shell was teaching at Pineapple Studios and raising his young family when he saw a poster advertising auditions for a workshop for young people who could roller skate. 'I couldn't remember if I could skate, and I wasn't young!' jokes Shell, who encouraged his students to audition instead. One of them, despite being unsuccessful, persuaded his teacher to have a go: 'He said: "Mr Shell, you're always telling us to do these things. Why don't *you* audition?"'

Four recalls later, 'Andrew and Trevor put their arms round me and I thought they were going to say no, nicely, but they said I'd got it!' Shell played Rusty for the first two years (and later returned for another two years as Poppa).

Straight off the back of his first two-year stint, he went over to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, playing Judas and then Jesus. 'None of this would have been possible without *Starlight*,' he says now. 'The fact that Andrew and Trevor took a chance on an unknown Black boy from Brooklyn will be something I'll always be grateful for.'

The diversity of that original London cast is something that Stilgoe remains proud of to this day. 'More than 50 per cent of Black actors in the West End were in *Starlight Express* through the run,' he says. Likewise, Nunn believes that the show's casting paved the way for positive change: 'To have that kind of diversity in a London show!' he says now. 'We'd started making inroads, as far as that was concerned.'

> **I liked what I heard at Sydmonton. Andrew's always been ceaselessly inventive and melodically led**
>
> Trevor Nunn, original director

Nunn had previously worked with Lloyd Webber and set designer John Napier on *Cats*, a musical 'with no orchestra pit, the audience on three sides, and the action constantly erupting into the audience', as he describes it today. It was, he says, the perfect outlet for Lloyd Webber, 'who loved revolutionising things'. But, in fact, the origins of *Starlight Express* were less about Lloyd Webber wanting to shake up the Musical Theatre world and more about drawing on his, and his children's, love of trains – 'He was passionate about trains,' recalls Phillips. 'At his home, he had the most extraordinary room with a giant train set in it.'

By 1976, an initial idea of an animated *Thomas the Tank Engine* musical had morphed into one about the American railroad – at which point Lloyd Webber asked Stilgoe, who had written the lyrics for the opening number of *Cats*, to get involved. They wrote a handful of songs, which were performed by the likes of Elaine Paige and Paul Nicholas at Lloyd Webber's annual festival at Sydmonton in 1982. Nunn was there: 'I liked the music,' he remembers. 'Andrew has always been ceaselessly inventive, and melodically led.' They went for a walk around the lake and Lloyd Webber pitched his idea to him: 'Andrew said, "So do you think there might be any way that the songs I was presenting could become a show?" My response was: "We've done *Cats*, you're saying the next one is trains – soon it will be refrigerators!" We had a giggle about it and agreed that we'd see if any ideas cropped up.'

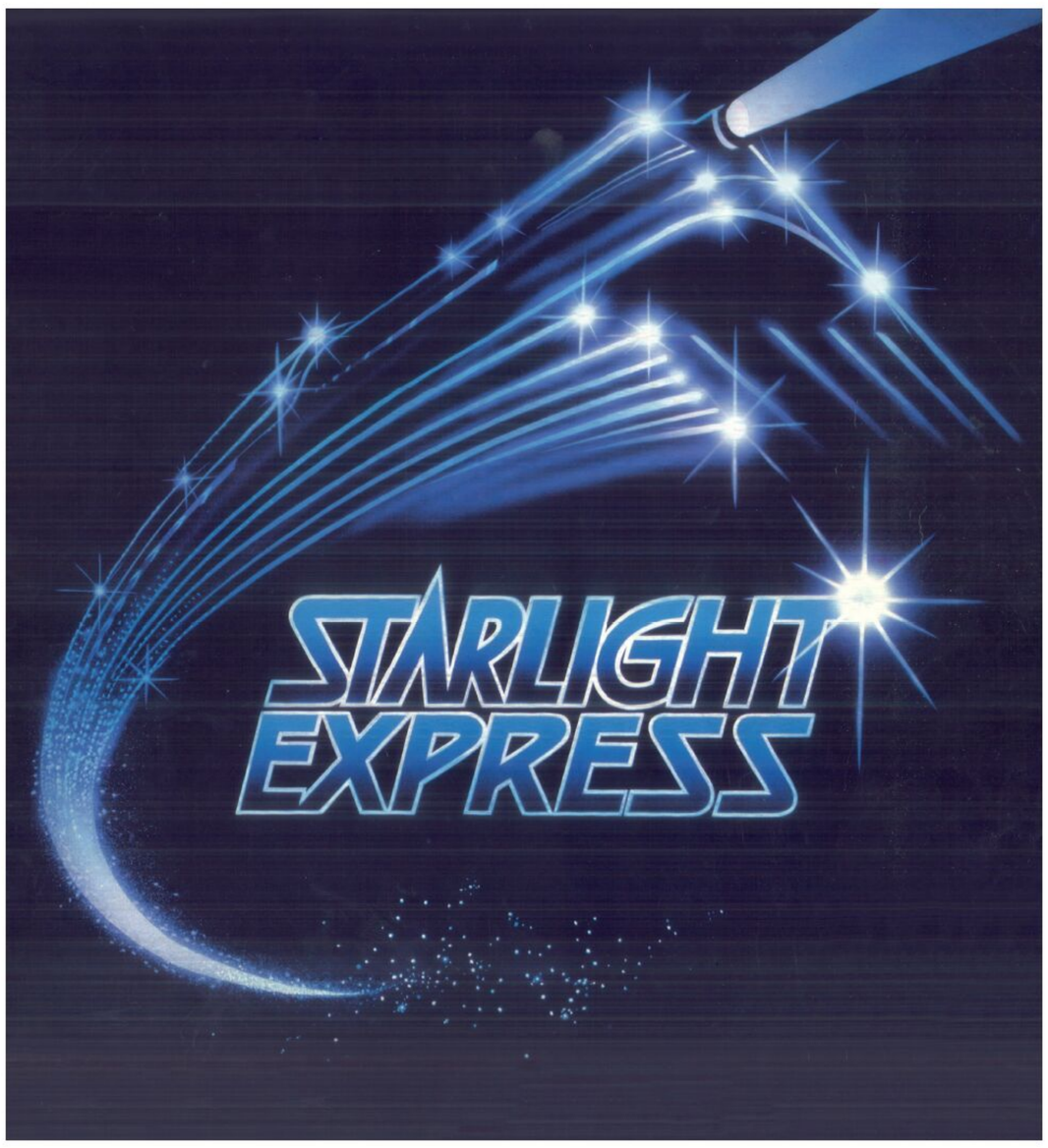
Later that year, Nunn was in New York with *Cats* designer Napier, overseeing the show's Broadway production and planning for a US tour. 'One Sunday morning, John and I said: "It's a sunny day, let's go for a walk in Central Park",' Nunn recalls. 'We saw a crowd in the distance – we walked over and, to my amazement, saw a concrete figure-of-eight track and loads of New Yorkers, with boom boxes on their shoulders, spinning around on roller skates. I looked at John, and said: "Oh my God, John. *Starlight Express*".'

Nunn acknowledges Napier's ability to 'take an idea and run with it, as nobody else could or would at that time'. As he remembers it: 'Within hours, we were talking about how there could be a huge theatre, with tracks through the audience. We were seeking anything that could break down the proscenium arch. When we shared our idea with Andrew, we realised this production could be a cross between a theatre show and a roller derby; between a piece of entertainment and a sporting event experience.'

The quest for the right venue led the creative team on an eventful, often mind-boggling journey. As Stilgoe recalls: 'We were standing in the rain at Battersea Power Station, with John, Andrew and Trevor seriously contemplating if Andrew should buy Battersea Power Station to put on *Starlight*! It didn't happen… This was one of many points where I thought, "I'm punching above my weight here. I just write funny songs".'

Eventually, they settled on the Apollo Victoria and embarked upon a series of radical alterations. Hundreds of seats were removed to make way for Napier's vision: race tracks engulfing the audience, two huge screens either side of the proscenium to show unseen parts of the races, a skating bowl, and a hydraulic bridge which transported skaters from the stalls to the circle and back again.

Innovative, certainly, but perhaps not entirely unexpected from this 'inventor', as Nunn refers to Napier, who also designed the cutting-edge costumes for the show.



Far left Stephanie Lawrence, Chrissy Wickham, Frances Ruffelle and Ray Shell, 1984 **Above** Bochum 2023/24 **Top** 1984 brochure cover

PHOTOGRAPHY: Colin Miller / courtesy of Ray Shell / Souvenir Brochure cover courtesy of a private collector; designed by Zarkowski Designs; © Copyright April 1984 The Really Useful Theatre Company Ltd

> **If Danny John-Jules could do it, the rest of us had to learn it. We'd be crying, 'Don't do it!'**
>
> Ray Shell, original Rusty

The time spent rehearsing inside the resulting space – 'about five weeks, the longest tech in Musical Theatre history', laughs Nunn – only came at the end of a gruelling, drawn-out process that had begun with a workshop near Leicester Square in March 1983 lasting several weeks. The first fortnight was given over to skate school because, even in the auditions for the workshop, there had been several mishaps. 'We wanted the quadruple threat,' remembers Nunn. 'At auditions, people would say they could skate, but then come crashing into my desk.' Adds Stilgoe: 'Our rule was, anyone who didn't skate into the piano would get a recall!'

Finding people who could skate, as well as sing, dance and act, was an enormous challenge. Although some, such as Shell and Ruffelle, could skate a little already, there were others whose 'brains went into their ankles', as Stilgoe puts it, as soon as they put their skates on. And it wasn't just plain skating that was required, either: 'We spent a long time working on how to dance on the toe stops,' Phillips says (see *My Musicals* last issue). 'And then, when Andrew created Electra and all the component parts, we had to look at yet another different way of working.' There were tricks to learn too, although they were mostly executed by the three Rockies who were highly skilled skaters. The original Rocky 1, Danny John-Jules – who went on to star in TV's *Red Dwarf* and *Death in Paradise* – came to the show from *Cats* but also had previous form as a skater. 'Arlene didn't always know what was possible or wasn't possible,' recalls Shell, 'so Danny would be asked to try things out. We'd be standing there, crying in front of Danny, saying "Please don't do it!" – because if he could do it, the rest of us had to learn it!'

In the end, adverts were placed in skate magazines, attracting people like Drue Williams – a builder who played roller hockey and had no previous performing experience. After singing an Elvis song successfully, 'he put on some very old roller boots, which he didn't do up properly', relates Stilgoe. 'He got up to an enormous speed and then jumped over the piano. Me, Andrew, Arlene and Trevor all looked at each other – it was a wonderful moment.'

The challenges of finding the right people meant that, says Mark Davis, 'you couldn't recast the show easily. Once you were in, you could do it until you were too old'. Davis was in the show for '10 years, on and off':

Inset Swing Rose Coutts-Smith and Rocky Sebastian Craig, 1985 **Above** New cast: Jeevan Braich (Rusty) and Kayna Montecillo (Pearl) **Right** Bochum 2023/24

PHOTOGRAPHY: Rose Coutts-Smith / Pamela Raith

'When I walked away in 1985, there was no one who could do our job, so we'd be asked back. Now,' he says, 'skaters are probably two a penny.'

And it's true that, for the Wembley version, finding the 'quadruple-threat' performer was relatively straightforward in comparison. Says Stilgoe: 'Once people show it can be done, others will follow; when *Starlight* opened in 1984, people started thinking, "Skating is a good skill to have".'

Following that initial workshop, rehearsals began in earnest in January 1984, in an empty cinema in Kensal Rise, North London. At the same time, Napier was building the set: 'John kept ringing me,' recalls Davis, 'saying he wanted me to skate another bit of track he'd laid out in the car park.' Early on, despite warnings to take off their skates during lunch break, one company member 'completely ignored what we'd said, tried to do some tricks and came crashing down', recalls Nunn. 'He sprained his ankle and was out of the show.'

When rehearsals moved into the Apollo, the accidents continued. Davis and Ruffelle were the first to try out the set in the theatre – 'It was dusty,' Davis remembers, 'and we fell down with a bang. I can still see Trevor, Andrew and John's faces: "What have we done?"' Davis had another close call when, during a dress rehearsal, his foot got caught in one of the moving race barriers. As he recalls: 'It broke my skate but only bruised my toes.' Other stories abound, from when Shell first put on his helmet and couldn't see – 'That was scary!' – to when Jeff Shankley, the original Greaseball, whacked his head on the bridge. As Nunn recalls: 'I spent a lot of time as director gently encouraging the coaches, who'd crashed and were sobbing, to get up and try again. I was like a psychiatrist!'

Lessons were learnt, and preventative measures were subsequently put into place. Race marshalls were introduced, as was a rule that the set would only move once all racers had exited the track. There was also a dedicated team of physios on hand. Still, health and safety has come a long way since 1984, and Wembley's skaters are likely to have an easier ride of it. As Stilgoe says drily: 'Padding is probably better now.' But it perhaps wouldn't be an overstatement to call the original London cast pioneers in their field. Without their courage and can-do attitude, the boundaries of what was possible in theatre may never have been pushed to such extremes. The same can be said of the creatives – *Starlight Express* was the first West End show to feature head mics, for example, and the production's entire sound system was unprecedented – whose joint mission was, to quote Nunn, 'the pursuit of total theatre, with all the elements coalescing'.

The new creative team is surely following in their footsteps. The set 'looks terrific', says Stilgoe, 'with proper tracks around the outside of the audience'. Many of the cast will have bodycams, with images projected onto multiple screens dotted about the set. Crucially, there's no circle, 'so everyone's going to get a good view'.

There are some new songs, and a very young cast, including an 18-year-old Rusty, Jeevan Braich, making his professional debut: 'You just wait until you hear him,' enthuses Stilgoe. 'He is wonderful.'

How will audiences react? Will it be as much of a game-changer as it was in 1984? That original production was a benchmark because, as Nunn says, 'the sheer revolutionary nature of it brought new audiences to Musical Theatre'. Surely now, as then, there will be people yet to experience immersive theatre but who are keen to try it; who may not have enjoyed traditional musicals in the past and who want to see something different; who might be curious about the 'Cinderella on wheels' narrative. Perhaps this show is for all of them. But it's also for us die-hard 'Starlighters' – for those of us who, back when we were still kids, had our minds, eyes and ears well and truly blown by the power of the Starlight Express. M

Starlight Express opens on 8 June – for tickets for Wembley (and Bochum), visit starlightexpresslondon.com; Robert Sellers's book 'When the British Musical Ruled the World', published by Applause, is reviewed in our Oct/Nov 2023 issue

Making Fetch

Happen!

Why the boom in campus musicals? With a new production of Mean Girls strutting into London this summer, **Jack Pepper** explores the success of the many shows set against the backdrop of a school, college or university – from Grease, Fame and Carrie to Heathers, Legally Blonde and, of course, that pinkest of cult classics by Tina Fey, now celebrating its 20th anniversary in movie form

It's not just the characters who are reaching adulthood in *Mean Girls*, but the story too, now celebrating its 20th year. As writer Tina Fey puts it: 'Everyone already knows what Regina means.' Not just because the story has become a cult classic, but because it comes from a place of truth; Fey used elements of her own high-school experience to shape this tale of teenage angst and high-school cliques. Her own college roommate inspired the name of its protagonist, Cady, a shy teen who goes from home-schooling in Africa to a socially sprawling American high school and desperately tries to fit in with the cool kids. Enter Regina George, at the centre of an exclusive group called 'the Plastics', both envied and loathed across campus. Oh, and they wear pink on Wednesdays.

Inspired by a self-help book memorably titled *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, the original movie came out in 2004, starring Lindsay Lohan and Rachel McAdams. Over a decade later, it was being adapted into a musical; Fey penned the book while her husband Jeff Richmond supplied the music, with Nell Benjamin contributing the lyrics. This came to Broadway in 2018 and was nominated for 12 Tony Awards, including Best Musical; it enjoyed 833 performances in New York.

Then, in a journey more confusing and circular than my teenage thoughts ever were, the film that became a musical – became a musical film. Specifically, a film version of the musical (though, somewhat controversially, it wasn't marketed as a musical). If you follow. Released in January this year, the film saw actress and pop star Reneé Rapp reprising the role of Regina, having played her onstage in 2019/20. It remained largely faithful to the original film, but with some timely updates to reference the swell of social media. (It also, again somewhat controversially, removed some of the Broadway show's songs, and added new ones.)

Across 20 years of remakes and updates, *Mean Girls* has become a global phenomenon: '3 October' (a throwaway line from Cady in the 2004 film) has become 'Mean Girls Day' (cue fans donning pink outfits); plus, Ariana Grande referenced the film in her video to the song 'Thank U, Next', which also featured actors from the original movie.

In the case of that original movie, Paramount research revealed that the audience was 75 per cent female, and half were aged under 18. There were similar results for the 2024 film, too.

The brand – with regard to the movies, at least – clearly knows its audience, and continues to target it. This year's film had an ingenious strategy on social media – a world referenced numerous times in the movie itself. With influencers cameoing onscreen and collaborating with Paramount as creative directors for the brand's social media, they uploaded the 2004 original onto TikTok in 23 parts to mark Mean Girls Day (which handily shares a date with National Boyfriend Day). The result? Sixteen billion hits for the *Mean Girls* hashtag.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

Left The new Mean Girls 2024 **Above** Cruel Intentions, produced by Paul Taylor-Mills

The stage show has had a more complex recent history. It closed on Broadway due to Covid; the pandemic also prevented a planned London stage production from opening in 2021. But now, the Plastics are well and truly in town, strutting into the Savoy Theatre from June.

It will be directed and choreographed by the mastermind of the Broadway version, Casey Nicholaw. Winner of two Tonys and an Olivier, he's worked on *The Book of Mormon*, *Aladdin* and *Dreamgirls*, and tells me that 'the heart is a big deal to me. To laugh your butt off through a whole show and then suddenly realise you have tears in your eyes; for it to creep up on you that you were caring for these people, when you thought all you were doing was laughing with them.'

Despite the emotive thread that unites Nicholaw's work, the London *Mean Girls* will be different to its Broadway iteration. 'There will be a lot of changes that we always wanted to make,' Nicholaw reveals. 'Jeff Richmond and Tina Fey wanted to incorporate some of the stuff from the latest film and cut some time out of the previous stage show. It will have a different feel for those who know the story so well.'

And a different feel compared to the movies, too, surely? No stage version could ever be a straight retelling of the film, and Nicholaw much prefers invention anyway: 'It has to be theatrical. You can't just lift a movie and put it onstage; plenty of people have done it but I don't think they're as successful.'

> **My chats with Tina centred on how we can deepen the characters through music**
>
> Casey Nicholaw, Mean Girls director (Broadway and West End)

An early lesson came when he choreographed *Spamalot*. 'Eric Idle wanted to cut so many things; those Monty Python sketches are iconic and I couldn't believe he wanted to cut so many of them from the stage show, but Eric said if people are really invested, they're not going to miss it until they get home. Those words have always stuck with me. If people are invested in a story and it feels like it really works onstage, they won't ask why something in the film didn't happen.'

For *Mean Girls*, Nicholaw points to the cafeteria scene and 'Where Do You Belong?' early in the story as a key moment where the stage show can build on the picture. 'In the movie it's lots of quick cuts, but here we do a whole number about it. The big difference, obvious though it sounds, is that a musical sings; all of these songs were created for us to learn more about the characters we met in the movie, and get more comedy out of them. My chats with Tina Fey often centred around how we can deepen the characters through music, feel for them more and get the most comedy.'

It's something performer Georgina Castle is particularly excited about. Fresh from playing Jovie in *Elf the Musical* at the

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith (both pictures)

Above Courtney Bowman challenges societal stereotypes in Lucy Moss's Legally Blonde **Right** Heathers on tour in 2023 - a new tour begins this July

Dominion Theatre, she's now embracing her dark side with the 'iconic villain', Regina. 'Tina Fey is constantly wanting to modernise the show and make it even more relatable to 2024 audiences,' Castle tells me. 'What I love about her writing is that she never completely condemns Regina. The message is that we can all be kinder to each other and that it's likely we have all done or said something hurtful. Having said that, though, one of the joys of playing Regina is that it takes her a lot longer to learn these lessons. She has darkness at her core and that is always super fun to play!'

So, what makes a campus musical especially popular with writers and audiences? The obvious answer is we've all been a teenager once, if not now. As Castle describes: 'We all carry baggage, bad and good, from this time in our lives. Plus, it's much easier to stick heavy emotional baggage into a setting that we have an understanding of.'

School can be a channel for strong emotions, positive and negative. It is partly the latter for Nicholaw, who went to four different schools from junior through high school, and two different elementary schools: 'I was used to being the new kid and being beaten up when I was younger. Everyone relates to high school – the groups you were in, or not in. Everyone feels like an outsider. It's traumatising, but there's comedy in that age too!'

Indeed, it's been said that 'comedy is tragedy plus time'. Nicholaw certainly made joy out of trauma in those difficult periods he experienced; although he 'hated' high school, he found strength in storytelling. 'As a gay man in the late 1970s, it was a very different story to what it is now. But I found theatre in 10th grade; I was part of a junior theatre group so that's where my focus went.'

A school, then, provides a neat balance of this light and shade, triumph and tragedy. 'That's what's so great about Tina Fey's writing,' Nicholaw adds. 'It's satire: it's funny but it's looking at a very real situation and finding something real to say about it.'

At a time when social media makes superficiality, typecasting and abusive behaviour an ever more alarming and omnipresent reality, *Mean Girls* remains relevant. As Castle puts it: 'Psychological warfare is, sadly, enduring. But watching *Mean Girls* and getting to see the inner workings of our fraught teenage brains played out with comedy, sensitivity and nuance is hugely comforting. Teenage me can squeal out, "You're not alone!"'

> **Parents go with their kids to Heathers – it's a cross-generational audience**
>
> Paul Taylor-Mills, producer

With theatre in general being the perfect vehicle for expressing heightened emotions, it's little wonder that our teenage years – where extreme ups and downs are par for the course – are so often a catalyst for theatre writers and producers. Plus, aren't we, as theatregoers, seeking to experience a similar rollercoaster of emotions from what we see onstage?

It's a point that producer Paul Taylor-Mills agrees with, having powered several onstage high-school hits, from established shows such as *Heathers* and *Carrie* to new work including *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Cruel Intentions*. 'The campus setting helps facilitate stories,' he suggests. 'It's a useful theatrical convention, allowing various sides to air their arguments. A school environment allows people to make mistakes, because they're younger, and it allows us to be less judgemental about decisions. Also, that period is crucial as people are growing up and learning about themselves.' If the heart of all good drama is tension, adolescence certainly poses plenty of that.

That said, the frequent campus backdrop to his own projects was an unconscious decision for Taylor-Mills. It was only in talking for this article that he realised that nearly 80 per cent of the musicals he has produced have been set on one. He suggests there could be a practical and commercial driver to the setting: 'I think it's part of my push to generate a new audience. A few years ago, I got worried that we would eventually not have younger audiences in the theatre. I made a conscious decision that the stories I tell do something to keep young people in theatre. The crux of the things that excite me is finding stories that appeal to young people – and those tend to exist in settings where young people are.'

Written by Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin Murphy, *Heathers* has just opened at London's @sohoplace for a six-week season and soon embarks on its third UK tour. Like *Mean Girls*, it's based on a movie classic widely acclaimed as one of the greatest cult teen films ever made. Just as Fey drew on her own experiences for *Mean Girls*, producer Taylor-Mills sees aspects of his past and himself in *Heathers*: 'You only spend this long dedicating your life to musicals if you *do* recognise yourself in these stories. In Veronica, I recognise the desire to do better, the desire to learn, and the desire to be the popular kid – all of us wanted to be the cool kid at some point.'

Bubbling underneath all this is something darker. School and youth don't equal frivolous fluff; the setting offers a neat vehicle to tackle important and heavy subjects. *Mean Girls* takes on bullying and body image, while *Heathers* explores teen suicide and sexual assault. And the broad range of audiences these shows attract – mostly young people, yes, but also their parents or other family members – can lead to some important conversations. 'The most incredible thing for me', continues Taylor-Mills, 'is seeing parents going with their children to *Heathers*. The show deals with some serious topics, and then provides theatregoers with an opportunity to discuss them. We see the same cross-generational audience with [Rob Madge's] *My Son's a Queer.*'

Similarly, seeing a show like *Legally Blonde* – particularly the 2022 version at Regent's Park directed by Lucy Moss – can lead to self-acceptance and even empowerment. Says Moss: 'It's about people underestimating Elle Woods because of her blondeness, her femininity… And her proving not only that she's more than those things, but that those things should be valued and celebrated. Many people can relate to being overlooked for parts of their identities that don't align with what society implicitly assumes is "serious". So I wanted to make this a show that was explicitly for all of those people.'

It's hardly surprising, then, that these musicals (particularly in their show versions) attract a diverse audience.

I ask Nicholaw if, working on *Mean Girls*, he had a certain audience in mind, and, unlike perhaps the movie franchise, the answer is an emphatic no. 'You have to think about the people *in* the show; those words and lyrics are coming out of the mouth of a teenager and so should sound like a teenager.

But as far as the audience goes, everyone has gone to school. It is for everybody. Even if the mean girls were different in the 1970s, they were still there and I experienced them myself.'

Like all good shows, we see ourselves reflected back in some way. Back to school we go. M

Mean Girls: The Musical plays at the Savoy Theatre, London, from 5 June and is booking until 16 February 2025 – visit london.meangirlsmusical.com; Heathers is at London's @sohoplace until 6 July, and on tour from 24 July – visit heathersthemusical.com; My Son's a Queer, (But What Can You Do?) is touring the UK from 8 July – visit @mysonsaqueer on all social media channels

PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Senior / Dan Kennedy

Above But I'm a Cheerleader, the 2022 show produced by Taylor-Mills **Right** Georgina Castle's Regina

> **We all have baggage, good and bad, from this time in our lives**
>
> Georgina Castle, Regina George

★★★★★

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MUSICAL THEATRE REVIEW

YOUR LIE IN APRIL

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Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Richard M and Robert B Sherman music, lyrics **Jeremy Sams** book **Ray Roderick** script adaptation
Mayflower Theatre, Southampton 30 April – 12 May 2024, then touring
REVIEWED ON 9 MAY 2024

Adam Garcia, Ellie Nunn, Ayrton English and Jasmine Nyenya in that spectacular flying car; Caractacus Potts (Garcia) and company perform 'Me Ol' Bamboo'

It's a long road that has taken *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* from the bedtime stories James Bond author Ian Fleming used to tell his kids to this touring musical.

Soon after Fleming's book was published posthumously in 1964, the writer swapping superspies for supercars, a film was cranked out with a wildly different plot, co-written by Roald Dahl and featuring songs by *Mary Poppins* composers and lyricists Richard M and Robert B Sherman.

Skip ahead nearly four decades and the film was reworked into a stage musical, with a bunch more songs by the Shermans, a three-year run at London's Palladium and – of course – a spectacular flying car. Then came the tours, many of them, the last ending in 2017 when *Chitty* ran out of petrol and was given a SORN for a few years.

Until along came Thom Southerland, regarded as one of the best directors of small-scale musicals in London, now proving to be one of the best at big touring productions too. He's given *Chitty* a tune-up and stuck the old banger on the road again.

The trouble is, every iteration of *Chitty* has always felt like a bit of a cash-in. The book did well because of Fleming; the film was an attempt to recreate the magic of *Mary Poppins*. From almost the opening note you can hear the Shermans aping – and failing to match – what they did so supremely in *Poppins*. Individual songs and their vibes map neatly from one score onto the other: 'Me Ol' Bamboo' reminiscent of 'Step in Time', the title number like 'A Spoonful of Sugar', 'Hushabye Mountain' echoing the calm, lulling sound of 'Feed the Birds' – all lesser.

> "Thom Southerland is now proving to be one of the best at big touring shows too"

But that doesn't stop Southerland's touring production bringing out the best of what is sometimes pretty mediocre material (the less said about the filler song 'The Bombie Samba' the better).

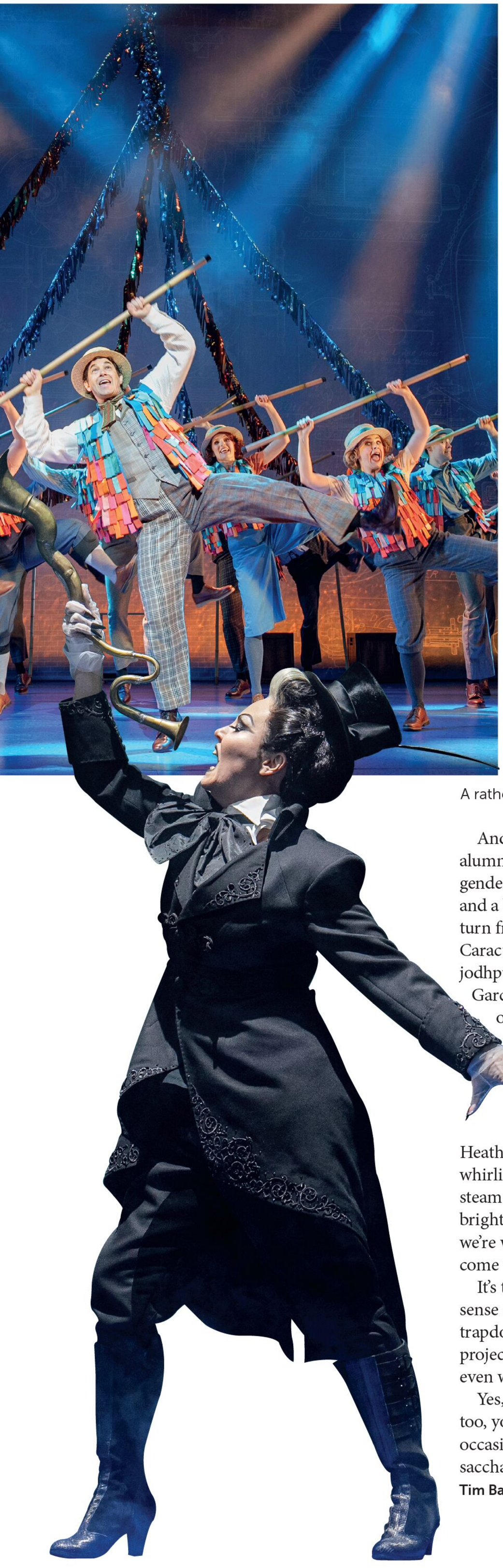
Of course there's the spectacle of the flying car, a triumph precisely because this is a tour: just trying to imagine the logistics of assembling and disassembling every week the system that makes a car and four passengers float invisibly over the stage makes the mind boggle. But more than that, Southerland makes his *Chitty* feel lavish and epic just through dexterous directing, a few neat stage tricks, and a massive dose of let's-not-take-this-too-seriously humour – a very necessary antidote to the show's overweening tweeness.

There's the Vulgarians for a start, the evil foreigners who want to steal the magic car restored by eccentric inventor Caractacus Potts: they're so camp, so cartoonish in their outrageous purple livery, with no opportunity for a wink or innuendo or pratfall passed over. Particularly good are Adam Stafford and Michael Joseph as Boris and Goran, a classic straight man/funny man double act, spies of Baron Bomburst sent to capture Potts and his car. Jenny Gayner puts in a brilliantly sinewy performance as the Baroness, too, dry-heaving at any mention of the c-word ('children', of course).

Production credits

Cast Adam Garcia, Liam Fox, Ellie Nunn, Martin Callaghan, Jenny Gayner, Adam Stafford, Michael Joseph, John Macaulay, Charlie Brooks *et al*
Direction Thom Southerland
Musical supervision George Dyer
Choreography Karen Bruce
Set, costumes Morgan Large
Lighting Ben Cracknell
Sound Gareth Tucker

PHOTOGRAPHY: Paul Coltas



A rather good show features Nunn's Truly Scrumptious and English and Nyenya as Jeremy and Jemima

And there's panto energy from *EastEnders* alumna Charlie Brooks's nasty Childcatcher, gender-swapped in Southerland's production, and a brilliantly assured, pleasantly pompous turn from *Emmerdale*'s Liam Fox as grandad Caractacus senior. Ellie Nunn is a winsome, jodhpured Truly Scrumptious, while Adam Garcia gives his Caractacus a light touch, not overdoing the eccentricity – in fact not overdoing anything, letting others shine around him, a more diffident and unobtrusive Potts than others have been.

Morgan Large provides plenty of Heath Robinson dottiness in his design – whirling cogs and wheels, pipes hissing steam – everything gleaming coppery bright, and all adding to the sense that we're watching, essentially, a daft cartoon come to life onstage.

It's that light tone as well as a sustained sense of the theatrical – puppet dogs, trapdoors, big physical sets rather than projections – that sustains the show even when the material drags.

Yes, you'll believe a car can fly; at times, too, you'll believe that this chuntering, occasionally backfiring, straight-six saccharine show is really rather good.

Tim Bano

Your guide to...

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Premiered 16 April 2002, London Palladium, directed by Adrian Noble, with choreography and musical staging by Gillian Lynne.

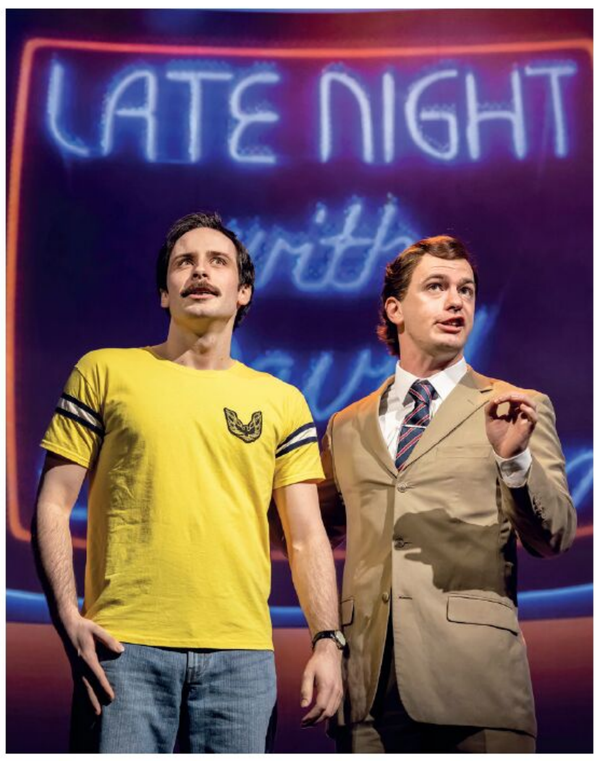
Origins Based on 1968 film directed by Ken Hughes, written by Hughes, Roald Dahl and Richard Maibaum.

Awards The 2002 production was nominated for three Olivier Awards; the 2005 Broadway staging received five Tony nominations.

Notable actors as Caractacus Potts Michael Ball, Gary Wilmot, Jason Donovan and Brian Conley (2002-2005), Raúl Esparza (Broadway 2005), Jon Robyns, Jason Manford and Lee Mead (UK tour 2015).

42 Balloons

Jack Godfrey music, lyrics, book
The Lowry, Salford 18 April – 19 May 2024
REVIEWED ON 2 MAY 2024



Charlie McCullagh (Larry), Simon Anthony (Letterman); Lejaun Sheppard (Ron), Evelyn Hoskins (Carol), McCullagh, Gillian Hardie ('Carol's Mom'); the chair takes flight

It seems like we've been feeling nostalgic for the 1980s almost since the decade ended. And nostalgia sells, as the continued success of '80s-set film-to-stage adaptations like *Footloose, Heathers*, *Pretty Woman* and *Back to the Future* testifies.

Their appeal, it could be argued, is due in large part to the enduring popularity of the chart hits they contain. The easy option, then, would have been to furnish *42 Balloons*, the story of real-life American eccentric Larry Walters – who, in 1982, flew 16,000ft above LA using a lawn chair and 42 helium-filled balloons – with relevant hits from the era, with obvious choices such as Nena's iconic '99 Red Balloons' ('42 weather balloons fly by…').

So, composer, book writer and lyricist Jack Godfrey deserves much praise for taking the far riskier route of creating original songs (around 30 of them) for this funny, touching and uplifting new musical, receiving its world premiere at The Lowry.

As the story is almost entirely sung-through, its success largely hangs on how these songs land. Thankfully – arrestingly orchestrated by Joe Beighton and propulsively performed by a six-piece onstage band – there isn't a duff one among them and Godfrey demonstrates impressive versatility in the ways he and director/dramaturg Ellie Coote use them to propel Larry's story along.

This is particularly true of Larry's rousing Act One number 'Big Balloon', which has shades of *Come from Away*'s 'Me and the Sky'. Elsewhere, 'Give it Up' channels the bubble-gum pop of Cyndi Lauper's 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun' and the partly rapped, *Hamilton*-esque '1982' riffs wittily on everything from the Beastie Boys to the theme tune from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Later, '42 Balloons and a Lawn Chair' echoes the call-and-response pep of Toni Basil's 'Mickey' and is one of many winningly performed ensemble numbers tightly choreographed by Alexzandra Sarmiento.

The other challenge is how to navigate the tragic turn Walters's story took after his stunt made him famous. It's not the first musical to touch on tragic real-life events (as witnessed by *Come from Away*'s 9/11-driven plot) or involve suicide (*Dear Evan Hansen*). But Larry's ultimate fate casts a pall on proceedings that some audience members will struggle with, even if the show ends up being more about the unlikely ways people inspire others than the details of his demise (while the poignant 'Up and Away' chronicles his mental state, Larry's final moments, sensibly, happen offstage).

> "Evelyn Hoskins and Charlie McCullagh are the beating heart of the production"

Walters may have ended up a laughing stock, but the show doesn't treat him like one, helped by Charlie McCullagh's sensitively calibrated performance. Godfrey's book details the setbacks and humiliations that prompted Larry to come up with such a plan, but it doesn't strain too hard to explain his actions – other than as a way for him to take back control. Instead, it revels in the absurd minutiae of Larry's scheme (as outlined in the fun, catchy 'Do You Wanna Know'). And then, when the details seem *too* unbelievable, the chorus assures us that they're true, wittily urging us to 'look it up after the show'.

The main reason that we end up rooting for him is due to Evelyn Hoskins as Larry's understanding and resourceful girlfriend Carol. Hoskins is brilliant at showing Carol's conflicting emotions and tugs the heartstrings with her final song 'Helium'. The other supporting characters are more thinly drawn, and we don't get much sense of the wider world, but Hoskins and McCullagh are the beating heart of the production.

Milla Clarke's eye-catching, bowl-shaped set is sometimes a little cramped and Andrzej Goulding's video projections overwhelming on occasion. Some people might also be disappointed that Larry's flight, when it comes, is more talked about than actually seen.

The show is co-produced by Andy and Wendy Barnes, the original team behind the mega smash hit *SIX*. While it is unlikely to replicate that show's incredible success, *42 Balloons* has a similar plucky, can-do spirit and inspiring, underdog energy, and deserves to find a loyal and devoted audience.

Chris Bartlett

Production credits

Cast Evelyn Hoskins, Charlie McCullagh, Gillian Hardie, Lejaun Sheppard, Simon Anthony *et al*
Direction, dramaturgy Ellie Coote
Music direction Flynn Sturgeon
Orchestrations, arrangements, musical supervision Joe Beighton
Choreography Alexzandra Sarmiento
Set Milla Clarke
Lighting Bruno Poet
Sound Paul Gatehouse
Video, animation Andrzej Goulding

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

London Tide

PJ Harvey music, lyrics **Ben Power** lyrics, book
National Theatre, London 10 April – 22 June 2024
REVIEWED ON 17 APRIL 2024

Ami Tredrea (Lizzie Hexam) and Bella Maclean (Bella Wilfer); Brandon Grace and Jake Wood play Charley and Gaffer Hexam; Jamael Westman is Eugene Wrayburn

It's been a while since we had a new musical based on the works of Charles Dickens. Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* is unquestionably the masterpiece of this sub-genre; other offerings include *Pickwick* (1963), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1985) and *Scrooge* (1992), all of which employed 19th-century music hall pastiche with varying levels of success.

Based on Dickens's last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), *London Tide* is a play with music rather than a musical, adapted by Ben Power with music by singer-songwriter PJ Harvey and performed by a 21-strong ensemble. Orphan kitsch and knees-up joviality wouldn't suit this dark tale of crime, class and corruption but it rather goes too far the other way with its cheerlessness.

There are no frills or folderols in Ian Rickson's production, which features a minimalist aesthetic (designed by Bunny Christie) that's permeated by shades of grey. Amidst the starkness, the cesspool that is the Thames, arguably the story's main protagonist, is evoked by Jack Knowles's striking use of exposed and undulating rows of lighting rigs. The characters sing defensively about how the river is a sewer but it's their sewer, rather like how this lengthy Brechtian-style show isn't petitioning the audience to like it.

It's an odd central premise. The will of the late Mr Harmon, a dust tycoon who built his fortune on the grime of London, decrees that his son John can only inherit his fortune if he marries clerk's daughter Bella Wilfer (Bella Maclean), whom he selected some years previously as a wilful two-year-old. When young Harmon's body washes up at Limehouse, the mysterious John Rokesmith (Tom Mothersdale) appears on the scene and seems to know more than he lets on. The blame falls at the feet of thuggish river scavenger Gaffer Hexam (Jake Wood, formerly *EastEnders*' Max Branning) and the sins of the father are inflicted upon his children, the loyal Lizzie (Ami Tredrea) and social-climbing Charley (Brandon Grace).

Jamael Westman (who originated the title role in the London production of *Hamilton* back in 2017) convincingly plays chivalrous lawyer Eugene Wrayburn, who's concerned with the plight of the poor and who educates and falls in love with Lizzie.

> "There's one plucky urchin in the form of Ellie-May Sheridan's scene-stealing turn"

She and the headstrong Bella are given more agency than in the original; rather than being happily married off at the end, Lizzie makes the decision to take some time to find herself, though this does make her self-inflicted martyrdom beforehand more exasperating.

It's reminiscent of *Les Misérables*, *The Threepenny Opera* and *Sweeney Todd* in themes and character types but Power's adaptation is exposition-heavy and Harvey's mournful ballads, played by a trio of musicians on piano/guitars, drum kit and keyboards, are spaced out unevenly within the narrative and struggle to distinguish themselves, especially when performed by voices of such mixed ability. While none of the songs are memorable, the music does feel stronger in the second half when the more vocally proficient cast members (particularly Maclean) have the chance to sing out.

The actors are largely required to serve as placeholders for the declamatory storytelling, rather than personifying full-bodied characters. Peter Wight brings warmth to Noddy Boffin, a former servant raised to the upper classes who isn't corrupted by his change in fortune. We're allowed to have one plucky urchin in the form of a sparky scene-stealing turn from Ellie-May Sheridan in her professional stage debut as Jenny Wren, the plain-speaking waif who ekes out a living making intricate dolls' clothing. She's taken ill at one point but thankfully it doesn't turn out to be a Little Nell type of situation.

Plays with music can easily fall between two stools. *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, now in the West End, perhaps sets the standard regarding what the form can do in terms of dramatic and emotional impact in which the songs go far beyond adding 'atmosphere'. *London Tide* offers the opportunity to do something different with Dickens, musically and theatrically, but it needs a stronger current to sweep the audience away.

Julia Rank

Production credits

Cast Brandon Grace, Bella Maclean, Tom Mothersdale, Ellie-May Sheridan, Ami Tredrea, Jamael Westman, Peter Wight, Jake Wood *et al*
Direction Ian Rickson
Music direction Ian Ross
Movement direction Anna Morrissey
Set, costumes Bunny Christie
Lighting Jack Knowles
Sound Tingying Dong, Christopher Shutt
Video Hayley Egan

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

MJ the Musical

Various music, lyrics **Lynn Nottage** book
Prince Edward Theatre, London 6 March 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 26 MARCH 2024

Just beat it: Tony Award winner Myles Frost (centre) 'bonelessly' recreates Michael Jackson's unique style of dance, influenced by Bob Fosse and Fred Astaire

Essentially, *MJ the Musical* is a jukebox musical. Two things make it stand above the rest. The first is the sheer quality of the jukebox – the back catalogue of Michael Jackson from his earliest success to his zenith, when the music he produced really did change the face of pop.

The second is the consummate skill with which director and choreographer Christopher Wheeldon manipulates the trajectory of Jackson's story, melding biography with spectacle, recreating some of the most famous dance steps in the history of music in ways that make them once again fresh and exciting.

It's a show for fans rather than sceptics, celebrating the vitality of Jackson's impact while carefully avoiding the controversy that now makes him toxic for some. Crucially, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage took the decision to set the show in 1992, when Jackson was preparing the four-continent, 15-month *Dangerous* tour. The first allegations of child sexual abuse against the star emerged a year after that. (They have always been denied by Jackson and by his estate, who give this show their backing.)

Even at that point, Jackson's reputation was already enigmatic. The show turns 'Thriller' into an exhilarating sequence that showcases his combative relationship with the press – cast as the zombies – who were already pursuing him with questions about his changing skin colour, plastic surgery, hyperbaric oxygen tents, addiction to painkillers – and Bubbles the chimp.

The media also make their presence felt as a fictional MTV crew is allowed an interview as part of a backstage film being made. But what Nottage concentrates on through this device is Jackson's relationship with his family, and particularly with his abusive father Joseph which both pushed him to perfection and also left him unloved and lost.

> "Myles Frost moves beyond impersonation into an empathetic identification of MJ"

Production credits

Cast Myles Frost, Ashley Zhangazha, Mitchell Zhangazha, Philippa Stefani, Phebe Edwards, Matt Mills, Rohan Pinnock-Hamilton, Matt Gonsalves, Jon Tsouras *et al*
Direction, choreography Christopher Wheeldon
Musical director Sean Green
Music supervision David Holcenberg
Orchestrations, arrangements David Holcenberg, Jason Michael Webb
Set Derek McLane
Lighting Natasha Katz
Sound Gareth Owen
Costumes Paul Tazewell
Projections Peter Nigrini
Michael Jackson movement Rich & Tone Talauega

The setting, brilliantly conjured by Derek McLane's design, dominated by long, steel-framed windows, is a rehearsal room, from which the flashbacks to childhood emerge.

We first see Jackson as he wanders into the room, in black trousers and white shirt, and launches into 'Beat It'.

Myles Frost, who won a Tony for his performance on Broadway (one of four taken by the show when it first opened in 2022), bonelessly recreates every move, his legs slipping and sliding across the stage, shoulders shimmying, hands propulsive. Even more impressively, he captures the frailty beneath the image, the breathy voice, the tentative yet unmovable demands.

Frost gives the show its centre, moving beyond impersonation into an empathetic identification with the mystery that Jackson represents. He's bolstered by performances from Dylan Trigger (as Little Michael at the performance I attended) and a lively Mitchell Zhangazha (as Michael) who play the singer at different times in his life, sometimes singing along with Frost as he recalls the past.

In the first act, these memories encompass a thrilling passage where Jackson remembers coming up through the amateur night-club circuit, and recalls his early influences such as James Brown, Jackie Wilson and the Isley Brothers. We hear snatches of their songs, but after that the score is assembled from a dizzying array of Jackson's own hits, some

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

Biography and spectacle are fluidly brought together in Christopher Wheeldon's 'kaleidescopic' staging

mere fragments, all superbly orchestrated and arranged by music supervisor David Holcenberg and Jason Michael Webb.

As director and choreographer, Wheeldon creates a stream of fluid pictures, building images of different stages in Jackson's life by running songs together in long choreographic streams of movement and sound, brought to life by Natasha Katz's astonishingly varied lighting, which graduates from subtle to eye-popping neon, and Peter Nigrini's projections.

The second act, for example, opens with Frost pulling on that famous sparkly glove in the spotlight, before morphing into a lovely tribute to Jackson's idols Fred Astaire and Bob Fosse, and paying tribute to the style of each. Each dance sequence is kaleidoscopic, sweeping the audience along with the power of familiar songs while simultaneously moving the narrative forward.

Within this, there's not much space for character development or even characters, beyond the actors playing Jackson. However, Ashley Zhangazha (uncle of Mitchell) impresses as both Rob, the harassed tour manager trying to keep everything on track, and as the manipulative patriarch Joseph.

No one could claim *MJ* is a show that goes deep, yet its surface shimmers brilliantly. It doesn't offer anything new in the way of explanation for why Michael Jackson was as he was, but it does present a convincing image of why he had the impact that he did.

Sarah Crompton

Your guide to...

MJ The Musical

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Premiered 6 December 2021, Neil Simon Theatre on Broadway, directed and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon. Its originally planned premiere in mid-2020 was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Running time Two hours 35 mins (including 20-minute interval).

The story Original biographical concept based on the life and music of King of Pop Michael Jackson.

Awards Nominated for 10 Tony awards and winner of four including Best Choreography and Best Actor in a Musical (Myles Frost).

Music The score comprises Michael Jackson's back catalogue, including 'Thriller', 'Billie Jean', 'Smooth Criminal' and 'You Can't Win', which Jackson sang as the Scarecrow in the 1978 film adaption of *The Wiz*.

Opening Night

Rufus Wainwright music, lyrics **Ivo van Hove** book
Gielgud Theatre, London 6 March – 18 May 2024
REVIEWED ON 22 MARCH 2024

Hadley Fraser 'directs' the company of Opening Night; Sheridan Smith's Myrtle, a troubled actress on the verge of a breakdown; Myrtle with Kelly (Rebecca Thornhill)

It's an exciting time for new British musicals, with several – *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Babies* – making their West End debuts. While in development, all of them were placed in front of an audience, whether that be in concert, on the London Fringe, or at regional theatres. Who knows whether this adaptation of John Cassavetes's 1977 film *Opening Night* could have been improved if the producers and creatives had followed the same path, but on the evidence of this bewildering and pretentious production at the Gielgud, it would have been worth a try.

A metadrama, *Opening Night* is set in a Broadway theatre where previews are taking place for the new play *The Second Woman* by Sarah Goode and a documentary crew is following the company's every move.

The respected actress Myrtle Gordon (Sheridan Smith) is already struggling with her role, believing it to be a stereotypical portrayal of a woman of a certain age. If she pulls off the performance, does that mean her career as it stands is all but over?

Already on the edge, and having mixed emotions about performing opposite her ex-husband Maurice (Benjamin Walker), Myrtle's mental health is sent into a downward spiral when Nancy, an obsessive fan, is killed by a car only moments after they have met for the first time outside the theatre.

The presence of Nancy (an impressive Shira Haas) – personifying a spirit of youthfulness, a life of possibilities slowly disappearing – soon becomes very real for Myrtle, leading to profound consequences both onstage and off, not least with her co-star Gus (Jos Slovick), writer Sarah (the powerful Nicola Hughes), director Manny (Hadley Fraser) and producer David (John Marquez).

All this might sound as if *Opening Night* has true dramatic potential, but sadly all the different strands provided by the heavyweight creative team led by writer/director Ivo van Hove, composer Rufus Wainwright and set, lighting and video designer Jan Versweyveld make for a messy, disappointing concoction that struggles to connect with an audience.

> "Smith is fully invested in her role, brilliantly adapting to the demands of the staging"

For the multi-award-winning *A Little Life*, van Hove was joined by other collaborators on the text and perhaps the same approach might have resulted in improvements here. Instead, the dialogue is often a cringeworthy, clichéd and disjointed commentary, leaving a top-notch cast little to draw on. It's also hugely frustrating to witness how several of the male protagonists patronise, undermine and insult the challenges being experienced by Myrtle, the playwright, and the director's put-upon wife Dorothee (Amy Lennox).

Versweyveld's set convincingly creates the backstage area, with the communal spaces spreading into the wings, but what dominates the whole affair is a massive screen above, following the onstage action from all angles, complete with close-up coverage of internal monologues.

Instead of serving the piece, this technology is a major factor in the production's downfall, creating yet more distance between the performers and the audience.

It's only when the screen is used to incorporate different thought processes, through some pre-recorded visuals, that one becomes a little more involved. And when it's turned off and Smith and Walker are given the freedom to share their feelings and frustrations during 'Makes One Wonder', there is a hint of what could have been.

Wainwright's score becomes bland and repetitive after a while, and it's hard to recall any of the individual numbers. The composer's obvious talent to incorporate different musical styles is evident but he is held back by a project that was maybe never meant to be a musical in the first place.

Smith remains fully invested in her role, bringing personal and professional experiences to bear and brilliantly adapting to both the theatrical and filmic demands of the staging.

As she stares into the dressing room mirror, or interacts with the spirit of her younger self, the actress attempts to invite us on the emotional journey Myrtle is on, but the shallowness of the material and the flaws in the staging stand as huge obstacles in her way.

Lisa Martland

Production credits

Cast Sheridan Smith, Hadley Fraser, Shira Haas, Nicola Hughes, Amy Lennox, John Marquez, Benjamin Walker, Ian McLarnon, Cilla Silvia, Jos Slovick, Rebecca Thornhill *et al*
Direction Ivo van Hove
Musical supervision, direction Nigel Lilley
Orchestrations, vocal arrangements Rufus Wainwright
Movement, choreography Polly Bennett
Set, lighting, video Jan Versweyveld
Sound Tom Gibbons, Alex Twiselton
Costumes An D'Huys

PHOTOGRAPHY: Jan Versweyveld

Police Cops: The Musical

Ben Adams music **Zachary Hunt, Nathan Parkinson, Tom Roe** lyrics, book

Southwark Playhouse Elephant, London 1 March – 20 April 2024

REVIEWED ON 14 MARCH 2024

Slapstick journey: Zachary Hunt in the driver's seat as rookie cop Jimmy Johnson; Nathan Parkinson, Melinda Orengo, Hunt, Natassia Bustamante and Tom Roe

There are plenty of reasons why Police Cops Comedy Theatre Company's *Police Cops: The Musical* will be compared (correctly) with SpitLip's *Operation Mincemeat*. Both have had long periods of development and tweaks during runs at various fringe venues, including the Southwark Playhouse. Both rely on parodies of familiar genres – World War Two-era stiff-upper-lip movies for *Mincemeat*; 1980s procedural cop shows for *Police Cops*. But while SpitLip's superbly crafted comedy has found a home in the West End, it feels like *Police Cops* is its own best version of itself as a fringe show so stupidly crazy, and crazily stupid, that it needs to be seen up close.

Co-creator Zachary Hunt plays idealistic young rookie cop Jimmy Johnson, who seeks to avenge the death of his sister by becoming The Best Damned Police Cop Ever™. He relishes the opportunity to go after mysterious crime lord Hernandez, a drug kingpin whose pursuit has destroyed other, more experienced cops. And they don't come more experienced, or more destroyed, than grizzled veteran Harrison (Tom Roe), who comes out of a self-imposed retirement at the bottom of a liquor bottle to take down the drug lord once and for all.

But that corny, if earnest, plot is primarily a means of delivering a crazy slapstick journey. *Police Cops* involves plenty of running jokes and one-off gags, all delivered at such a lick that the odd misfire is readily forgiven.

Even the overt racism of Nathan Parkinson's police chief – who, in common with many 1980s LA-set police cop shows, is capable only of seeing Mexicans as a crime-ridden scourge on his city – is sent up so relentlessly that we are encouraged to push through any discomfort and laugh at the ridiculous man with his ridiculous attitudes.

The strength of the parody is underlined by the songs, composed by Ben Adams (*Eugenius!*), which mock the idea of American exceptionalism and perfectly match, and satirise, the kind of gung-ho attitudes that TV shows of the era espoused. Numbers such as 'US Eighties' and 'Am I an Americant' are laden with ironic bombast, but there are opportunities for emotional depth amid the silliness as well. The four-piece band, led by musical director Gabriel Chernick, imbue the numbers with a full rock sound from their perch atop Andrew Exeter's red, white and blue set.

> "It's a show so stupidly crazy, and crazily stupid, that it needs to be seen up close"

But while the three central men – the co-writers and directors of the piece, as well as the founding members of the Police Cops comedy group – bring delight through the comedy that has been honed over years of working and reworking this material, the musical wouldn't feel as rounded as it does without Melinda Orengo and Natassia Bustamante fleshing out the cast in a variety of roles. Orengo's Rosa, Jimmy's former high-school sweetheart, with whom he has a surprise reunion, is a delight. But it is Bustamante, both as Jimmy's tragic sister and as former police chief Gonzalez, who comes across as the breakout star of the evening. With singing and dance skills that are more than equal to her comedy talents, hers is a name to savour in the future.

There are points at which one might yearn for a little more coherent storytelling and wish that the central plot at the heart of Jimmy and Harrison's buddy movie was elevated to the point where it had a little more meat to it. But as a frame upon which to hang gag after gag, with a hit rate that rarely lets up, it certainly gets the job done.

The biggest problem with this show is that it is the perfect size and sensibility to become a long-runner, but to do so would reduce the space for other fringe musicals to get the same chance to develop and grow. That opportunity has served Hunt, Parkinson and Roe's company well: they may just have hit upon the Best Damned Police Cops Musical Ever™.

Scott Matthewman

Production credits

Cast Zachary Hunt, Nathan Parkinson, Tom Roe, Melinda Orengo, Natassia Bustamante
Direction Zachary Hunt, Nathan Parkinson, Tom Roe
Choreography Matt Cole
Musical direction Gabriel Chernick
Musical supervision, orchestrations Rich Morris
Set, lighting Andrew Exeter
Sound Charlie Smith

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club

John Kander music **Fred Ebb** lyrics **Joe Masteroff** book
August Wilson Theatre, New York 1 April 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 17 APRIL 2024

US LIVE SHOWS

Willkommen! And bienvenue! Welcome!: Gayle Rankin as 'scrappy British cabaret singer' Sally Bowles; Cliff (Ato Blankson-Wood) falls for Sally's charms

It's been 25 years since Rob Marshall and Sam Mendes staged *Cabaret* in a Broadway theatre designed to evoke the show's Weimar-era Kit Kat Club, with the audience seated at café tables. Rebecca Frecknall's revival, imported from London, aims to push the immersive experience further. Designer Tom Scutt has transformed the entire August Wilson Theatre, including the marquee (which reads 'Kit Kat Club,' the show's title relegated to an eye-shaped 'C' logo). Theatregoers are invited to arrive up to an hour and 15 minutes before curtain, ushered through a back alley, handed a complimentary shot of schnapps, and then encouraged to explore the lobby and two upper hallways decked out as bar/performance spaces for seven roving dancers and five musicians. Dressed in costumes (also by Scutt) that look like the result of a *Project Runway* thrift-store challenge, they perform burlesque-meets-mime routines, as when a female dancer twerks up against a standing bass. (Jordan Fein is credited as the prologue director, with music by Angus MacRae.)

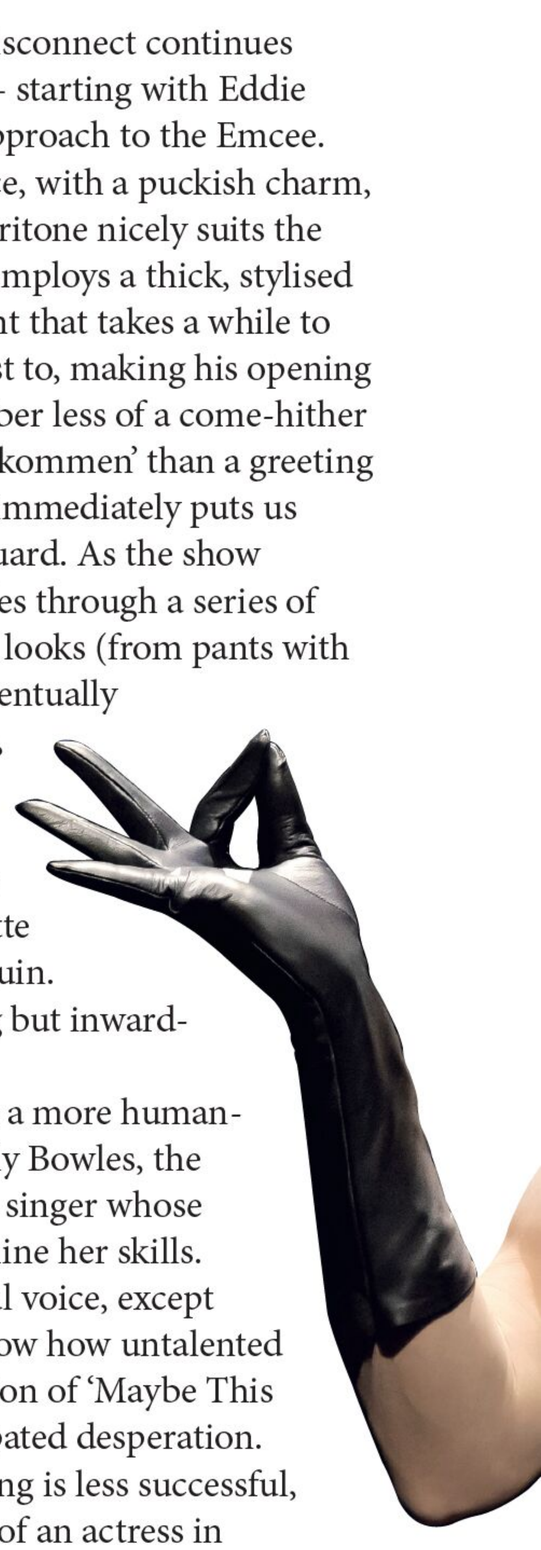
More surprises await in the auditorium, where the original stage has been converted into two levels of seating, leaving the cast only a circular platform with a fringed canopy overhead. Small round tables circle the new stage, and even the traditional seating includes a slender shelf for drinks. (Producers must be counting on pre-show booze and food sales to recoup the costly renovation.) Patrons at my preview had swallowed the marketing pitch – they were dressed in club-ready glittery gowns, precarious heels and flapperish fascinators.

I have no idea what any of this elaborate framework has to do with John Kander and Frank Ebb's beloved musical about a couple of expat creatives in pre-World War Two Germany. I could imagine an immersive club for *La Cage aux Folles* without any tonal challenges, but there's nothing about Frecknall's approach that prepares you for the dark turns that this musical takes as the Nazis bust up the revelry.

> "Rankin has a wonderful voice; 'Maybe This Time' oozes with dissipated desperation"

Unfortunately, the disconnect continues during the show itself – starting with Eddie Redmayne's peculiar approach to the Emcee. He's a dynamic presence, with a puckish charm, and his clear, strong baritone nicely suits the showier tunes. But he employs a thick, stylised accent that takes a while to adjust to, making his opening number less of a come-hither 'Willkommen' than a greeting that immediately puts us on guard. As the show progresses, and he cycles through a series of ever-more exaggerated looks (from pants with flares at the thigh to eventually a Reich-style overcoat), he maintains his distance with a series of broad hand gestures that suggest a marionette or 19th-century harlequin. It's a skilful, fascinating but inward-facing performance.

Gayle Rankin makes a more human-scale impression as Sally Bowles, the scrappy British cabaret singer whose survival instincts outshine her skills. Rankin has a wonderful voice, except when she's trying to show how untalented Sally is, and her rendition of 'Maybe This Time' oozes with dissipated desperation. Her take on the title song is less successful, a performative display of an actress in



Production credits

Cast Eddie Redmayne, Gayle Rankin, Bebe Neuwirth, Ato Blankson-Wood, Steven Skybell, Henry Gottfried, Natascia Diaz *et al*
Direction Rebecca Frecknall
Choreography Julia Cheng
Music direction, supervision Jennifer Whyte
Set, costumes Tom Scutt
Lighting Isabella Byrd
Sound Nick Lidster
Hair, wigs Sam Cox

Eddie Redmayne's fascinating Emcee; Herr Schultz (Steven Skybell) and Fraulein Schneider (Bebe Neuwirth)

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

breakdown mode rather than a *cri de coeur* that rings true. Scutt's design also lets her down – why is her supposedly very expensive fur coat dyed a sickly green? Worse, she has zero chemistry with American wannabe novelist Clifford (Ato Blankson-Wood, a fine actor saddled with a thankless role). His quick romantic attachment to Sally is puzzling since he's introduced as bisexual (even smooching a chorus boy) and lacks his own song to define a character meant to be the audience's stand-in. (Cliff had a song in both the original 1966 production and the 1987 revival.)

The key relationship that emerges is the unlikely romance between spinster landlady Fraulein Schneider (Bebe Neuwirth, in peak form) and fruit salesman Herr Schultz (Steven Skybell), who flirt adorably and bring an earnest ardour to duets like 'It Couldn't Please Me More.' They emerge as the show's emotional centre, making palpable the damage that the Reich will wreak even as their late-in-life love blinds them to the magnitude of the threat. These two lost souls offer proof that even a flawed *Cabaret* is still worth the price of admission – though they'd probably feel out of place in the ultra-hip version of the Kit Kat Club that surrounds them.

Thom Geier

Your guide to...

Cabaret

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Premiere Directed by Hal Prince, it officially opened at the Broadhurst Theatre, New York, on 20 November 1966. It ran on Broadway for 1,166 performances, winning eight Tonys.

The story With source material by John Van Druten and Christopher Isherwood, it charts a doomed affair between Sally Bowles and writer Cliff Bradshaw against a backdrop of the burgeoning Nazi regime.

Film (1972) Producer Cy Feuer commissioned an alternative script, and three additional Kander and Ebb songs were inserted: 'Mein Herr', 'Money' and 'Maybe This Time'. Liza Minnelli starred, Bob Fosse directed.

Did you know? Original Emcee Joel Grey won a Tony for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical, as well as an Oscar for the same role.

Illinoise

Sufjan Stevens music, lyrics **Justin Peck, Jackie Sibblies Drury** book
St James Theatre, New York 24 April – 10 August 2024
REVIEWED ON 25 APRIL 2024

Telling wildly different tales: Elijah Lyons, Shara Nova and Tasha Viets-VanLear; the 'stupendous' Broadway company of hypnotic, dance-driven spectacular Illinoise

It has been circling Broadway for nearly a year, selling out non-profit venues from Bard College in New York's Hudson Valley to the Chicago Shakespeare Theater to Manhattan's Park Avenue Armory. Finally, *Illinoise*, the hypnotic 90-minute dance-driven spectacular based on Sufjan Stevens's 2005 cult-classic album ('Illinois' without the 'e') arrived just a day under the wire of eligibility for the Tony Awards.

Is the show worth the breathless anticipation? Yes, often. Oddly enough, however, the least compelling element in the form known as a 'dansical' is the choreography itself. Justin Peck, a creative force at the New York City Ballet and choreographer of Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* film, has also directed and co-written the piece (with Pulitzer winner Jackie Sibblies Drury).

The result is a daring, elusive, total-theatre adaptation of Stevens's coming-of-age, genre-shifting concept album. And the 12 dancers, none of whom speak, are all stupendous. But the busy movement – primarily repetitive half-circles of taut arms, legs, torsos – seldom has the originality of such gold-standard dansicals as Twyla Tharp's 2002 *Movin' Out*.

Innovation is nearly everywhere else. The band delivers Stevens's soft-rock, harder-rock, country, folk and minimalist music from above, looking down on the three enchanting, ethereal singers wearing butterfly wings and grunge. The action travels from 'middle of nowhere' to Chicago to New York and back, identified by lights on an old billboard. Adam Rigg's sets introduce many of the silent storytellers through personal journals around a campfire in a clearing of prairie grass with people holding magical globes of light – like fireflies or, no kidding, UFOs – and upside-down pine trees lurking from above.

> "A daring, elusive, total-theatre adaptation of Stevens's genre-shifting concept album"

At first, the show is an anthology of wildly different tales, initially gruesome. These include, or so the programme tells us, 'a story about Jacksonville,' a small town where Byron Tittle, as a dashing preacher man, does a ferocious tap seduction for a young woman. Horror stories pile up. In 'a story about Zombies', monsters in green masks wiggle their fingers and flex into backbends while a woman (the remarkable Jeanette Delgado) runs in place as if in a nightmare. 'A story about John Wayne Gacy, Jr' is inescapable danger in a clown-face chasing boys.

But don't be scared away. Before long, Superman arrives in the formidable presence of Brandt Martinez, a reluctant, poignant man of steel with a cape made from a checkered tablecloth and powerful slashing turns that contradict his bewildered face.

Then the story turns abruptly and forever, for better and for worse, to Henry (Ricky Ubeda, amazing), the seeker whose love life dominates the rest of the show. Henry loves his best friend Carl (the charismatic, heart-tugging Ben Cook) but Carl loves his girlfriend (Gaby Diaz), who is diagnosed with cancer while the young men are driving from Chicago to New York. Road trip turns into guilt trip. Suddenly, the intentionally obscure, poetic mysteries

Production credits

Cast Ricky Ubeda, Ben Cook, Brandt Martinez, Gaby Diaz, Jeanette Delgado, Byron Tittle *et al*
Direction, choreography Justin Peck
Musical direction, supervision Nathan Koci
Orchestrations, arrangements Timo Andres
Set Adam Rigg
Lighting Brandon Stirling Baker
Sound Garth MacAleavey
Costumes Reid Bartelme, Harriet Jung
Masks Julian Crouch

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy

Amazing Ricky Ubeda (also inset) and charismatic, heartbreaking Ben Cook take a road trip to remember

become specific, obvious, even sentimental, including the dead girl on a slab and Carl getting lured to his death by the Zombies, who are back. Henry pulls himself apart with despair and confusion in a soul-lacerating solo, then mopes, then finds a guy who loves him back.

There are many false endings in many locations. The women are increasingly underutilised and we begin to be annoyed that they're wearing sexy midriff-baring crop tops (costumes by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung) while the guys look appealingly normal in flannels and sweat socks.

With Henry, we journey through fear of being left, of leaving, of loving too much/not enough. An insert in the theatre programme is a fantasy of Henry's private journal, with text by Drury, and childlike, endearing scribbles and doodles by illustrator Joanna Neborsky. We can't help wondering if the show itself is diminished by asking us to read the journal, which, admittingly, helps us to better understand what's happening onstage. On the other hand, so do liner notes on a valuable, challenging album. Reservations aside, Broadway always expands with challenge.

Linda Winer

Your guide to...

Illinoise

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Premiered 24 April 2024, St James Theatre on Broadway, directed and choreographed by Justin Peck. Orginally titled *Illinois*, the dance revue musical first opened at New York's Bard College in June 2023.

Running time One hour 30 mins (no interval).

The story Inspired by Sufjan Stevens's 2005 concept album which explores themes related to the state of Illinois.

Awards Four Drama Desk Award nominations and four Tony nominations (including for Justin Peck's choreography).

Music The song 'Chicago' tells a semi-autobiographical story of a young idealistic man on a road trip.

Suffs & Lempicka

Suffs

Shaina Taub music, lyrics, book

The Music Box, New York 26 March 2024 – ongoing

REVIEWED ON 17 APRIL 2024

Lempicka

Carson Kreitzer lyrics, book, original concept **Matt Gould** music, lyrics

Longacre Theatre, New York 19 March – 19 May 2024

REVIEWED ON 25 APRIL 2024

Humour and purpose: Jenn Colella and the all-female Suffs company; Tsilala Brock and Grace McLean; Anastacia McCleskey, Laila Erica Drew and Nikki M James

Suddenly, or so it seems, this is Forgotten Women season on Broadway. Two musicals, both with award-winning women directors, celebrate heroines who have been egregiously passed over in the great testosterone-fuelled expanse of history. Both efforts make convincing cases for the worthiness of these overlooked figures, but only one gives us the theatre-making they deserve.

The surprising delight is *Suffs*, with book, music and lyrics by its lead actor Shaina Taub. On the surface, this is a primer of the 1913-20 suffragist struggle that won women the right to vote. But the show, which comes with such credentials as co-producers Hillary Rodham Clinton and Nobel-laureate activist Malala Yousafzai, combines a straightforward history lesson with gutsy, smart, moving entertainment. It is both self-mocking and sincere, authentic even when unapologetically didactic.

Social change is never easy and seldom pretty, as movements around the world keep reminding us. Here, the all-female cast plays people whose names we vaguely know and many we will now.

Taub, whose biography dedicates the show to 'every loud little girl', portrays Alice Paul, a nervy young idealist who challenges the ladylike older generation of suffragists with an in-your-face obnoxious fervour.

In director Leigh Silverman's modest, inventive production, reportedly revised since its 2022 premiere at the Public Theater, we first meet these characters as cut-out silhouettes – familiar outlines of faceless figures in Edwardian dresses and enormous hats (observant costumes by Paul Tazewell). No one will be faceless for long.

From the opening song, 'Let Mother Vote,' we know that these are women with a sense of humour and a sense of purpose. What we do not know immediately is the ravishing close harmonies of the women's voices, the colours blending in duets, trios and choruses. Taub, whose collaboration with Elton John in *The Devil Wears Prada* is scheduled for the West End this autumn, writes deceptively simple dance rhythms – a waltz for the sardonic 'Great American Bitch', a tango for the defiant 'This Girl'. The rhymes can look banal in retrospect – 'demand to be heard / won't be deferred', 'It's my turn / never learn' – but they move stories along with the musical inevitability of anthems.

> "Ravishing close harmonies of women's voices blend in duets, trios and choruses"

Jenn Colella has just the right dash of self-knowledge as Carrie Chapman Catt, the old-school feminist who insists 'the kitchen is the key to the US victory'. Hannah Cruz evolves from flapper glamour-puss to unstoppable movement martyr as the lawyer Inez Milholland. Emily Skinner has a grand torchy moment as Alva Belmont, who proclaims every movement needs a 'rich white widow' to fund its trouble. Grace McLean plays the manipulative President Woodrow Wilson as a letch for 'the ladies', just the clever side of cartoon villain. And Nikki M James is formidable as Ida B Wells, the Black journalist who dares to write an antiwar editorial during World War One.

Other Black politics feel shoehorned in with cliché. A number of songs suggest a number of other shows, including *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Hamilton* and, especially, *Ragtime*. However, despite the musical familiarities, the whole of *Suffs* is a fresh reminder of the police violence, the prison abuse and the conflict that can tear women apart by the desire for love and the demands of professional ambitions.

'Marriage is a death sentence,' sings Alice's young co-worker (Ally Bonino) in a mock courtship duo with the President's increasingly knowing assistant before they learn a better way.

Mayte Natalio's choreography puts a little tilt of the hips under the chaste long dresses of the proper socialites. Riccardo Hernández's sets intentionally dwarf the individual women with the austere tall columns of monumental power.

Generations replace generations, each trusting that theirs is the one that will finally bring equality – or, as each impatient, outraged rebel insists: 'Now is the next time.' Now feels like a good time for *Suffs*, when Broadway has finally opened a bit to women creators with new insights on stories we think we know.

Production credits – Suffs

Cast Shaina Taub, Nikki M James, Jenn Colella, Hannah Cruz, Emily Skinner, Grace McLean *et al*
Direction Leigh Silverman
Musical direction Andrea Grody
Orchestrations Michael Starobin
Choreography Mayte Natalio
Set Riccardo Hernández
Lighting Lap Chi Chu
Sound Jason Crystal
Costumes Paul Tazewell

PHOTOGRAPHY: Joan Marcus / Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

Just picture it: Eden Espinosa plays the fascinating artist Tamara de Lempicka; Beth Leavel makes a big impression in a small role; the fashionable Broadway cast

Tamara de Lempicka deserves to be remembered, too, or at least the creators of *Lempicka* think she does.

But the musical, which closed early on 19 May, does her no favours with this over-blown, undercooked muddle about the inarguably fascinating life of the formative Art Deco artist. Barbra Streisand and Madonna are big fans of the work now being deservedly rediscovered. Sotheby's New York had a spring exhibit dedicated to her life and paintings. The first major US retrospective of the Polish painter's work will open at San Francisco's de Young Museum in October. The advertising world has been ripping her off for decades.

How I wanted to fall in love with the wild thing behind the daring images of magnetic, mysterious people – especially women – with hard edges, eerie translucent eyes and voluptuous curves. But somehow, despite a biography that includes the Russian Revolution, Hitler, polyamorous sexuality and raging celebrity in Paris between the wars, the show lacks style.

Eden Espinosa, who missed a number of performances due to illness, makes an oddly domesticated Lempicka. Until late in the flamboyant second act, she looks dowdy in Paloma Young's costumes. Espinosa has a big, luscious voice that can belt with the range of a star who played Elphaba in *Wicked* on Broadway and in California.

Unfortunately, however, the show, which was developed at the Williamstown Theatre Festival and the La Jolla Playhouse, has synthetic, generic pop-ish music by Matt Gould and his book with Carson Kreitzer glosses over the huge historical events that surely must have helped form her influential aesthetic.

The story is framed by scenes of the artist as an old woman on a bench. How did she end up there, she wonders, out of fashion and out of lovers?

Cue the flashbacks to her as an excited bride and budding artist, about to marry up the food chain to Russian aristocracy (Andrew Samonsky), only to be forced to be plundered by revolutionaries to save his ungrateful life.

> "Beth Leavel has a beautiful moment with a nuanced aria as the ailing Baroness"

Dramatic stuff, right? That's just the beginning. And yet, direction by Rachel Chavkin (*Hadestown*) seems both uneasy with the currency of a big screaming blockbuster and unable to locate a show that could make it instead on good taste. Espinosa and Amber Iman, admirable as Lempicka's true love and bluesy lesbian heartbreaker, both received Tony nominations for performances that strain for the belt of hit-show dynamism.

They are asked to compete with a busy faux-decadent chorus that never lets us forget the influence of *Cabaret* and the distraction of far too many expert wise-cracking sidekicks. These include George Abud as the wiry, sarcastic artist/critic and Natalie Joy Johnson as the gender-fluid bartender whose dreams of starting a gay bar are smashed by the inevitable Nazi boot. Most jarring, however, are Lempicka's repeated attempts to describe art (line, colour, form) that evoke automatic negative comparisons with the genuine famous profundities of *Sunday in the Park With George*.

How did the creature become the visionary icon of an entire cultural era? Basically, we learn that her mother advised her to smile and keep bracelets to trade in hard times. She was also supposedly told to 'never let them see your brush stroke.'

We are reminded that art didn't get the world into its mess, 'but only art can get us out'. Riccardo Hernández, who also designed the scenery for *Suffs*, simplifies historical complexities and evokes Lempicka's style with a handsome abstraction of curvy scaffolds and tubes of coloured lights.

Beth Leavel has a small but beautiful moment with a nuanced aria as the ailing Baroness who begs Lempicka to immortalise her with a painting. We can't help but wish we could instead see a musical about her.

Linda Winer

Production credits – Lempicka

Cast Eden Espinosa, Amber Iman, George Abud, Natalie Joy Johnson, Beth Leavel *et al*
Direction Rachel Chavkin
Musical direction Charity Wicks
Choreography Raja Feather Kelly
Set Riccardo Hernández
Lighting Bradley King
Sound Peter Hylenski, Justin Stasiw
Costumes Paloma Young
Projections Peter Nigrini

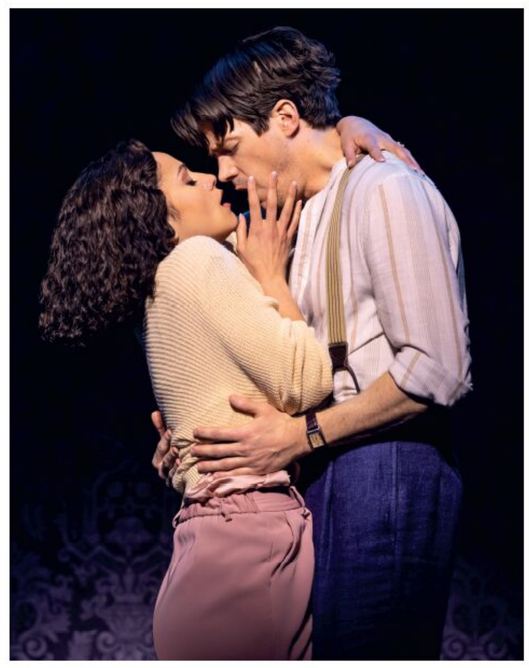
Water for Elephants & The Outsiders

Water for Elephants

PigPen Theatre Co. music, lyrics
Rick Elice book
Imperial Theatre, New York 24 February 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 20 MARCH 2024

The Outsiders

Jonathan Clay, Zach Chance, Justin Levine music, lyrics
Adam Rapp, Justin Levine book
Bernard B Jacobs Theatre, New York 16 March 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 5 APRIL 2024



Big top: Paul Alexander Nolan brings a showman's flair to ringmaster August (left, centre with Grant Gustin); Isabelle McCalla as Marlena with Gustin as Jacob

Broadway has been littered with stage musical adaptations of classic novels and movies but there are innate challenges in adapting familiar stories to a new medium. The creators of *Water for Elephants* and *The Outsiders* both ground their scores in the country-folk tradition of American roots music, to varying degrees of success, and find innovative ways to capture the visceral nature of their stories.

For *Water for Elephants*, that means leaning into the milieu of a Depression-era circus with the promise of Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics (designed by Cirque vet Shana Carroll) and a deliberately dishevelled puppet menagerie. Director Jessica Stone has nailed a stripped-down let's-put-on-a-show aesthetic for the production's look, her creative team producing an overall storybook effect. The circus train is suggested by simple scaffolding, for instance, and the train wheels are barrels that double as rolling platforms for gymnastic dance routines choreographed by Jesse Robb and Shana Carroll.

The simplistic love story, based on Sara Gruen's bestselling 2006 novel and a limp 2011 movie starring a miscast Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson, becomes a sideshow to production numbers featuring a chorus of rope-walkers, tumblers and aerialists who throw each other around the stage. Those bigger numbers with the full company making full use of the stage (and the space above it) really shine here. Still, there are some quieter moments that also stand out for their visual artistry – as when aerialist Antoine Boissereau, playing an ailing horse who had long been the top act, ascends above the stage via a long strip of fabric and then spins and writhes in an agonising depiction of the beast's death throes.

But when we leave the Big Top, the central love story's conventionality surfaces. Grant Gustin, a *Glee* alum who starred in TV's *The Flash*, brings a gangly, aw-shucks charm to Jacob, a veterinary-school dropout who joins the struggling circus and falls for equestrian star Marlena (Isabelle McCalla, a plucky ingenue with a pretty voice) – who's married to owner and ringmaster, August (Paul Alexander Nolan).

> "With the conjuring of a bygone circus in all its sepia-toned glory, misgivings fade away"

Nolan is a natural performer with a booming tenor voice, and he brings both an enticing showman's flair to the circus routines and a glowering malevolence to the love-triangle storyline. (Christoph Waltz, a natural onscreen baddie, played the role in the movie.) But book writer Rick Elice doesn't know quite how villainous to make the onstage August. Unlike in the book (and movie), Nolan's August actually hands Jacob the gun to euthanise that foundering horse – which deprives the story of a justifiable conflict between the two men (aside from Jacob's growing romantic attraction to Marlena). But since Marlena's a married woman destined to be with our blandly appealing hero, August is soon whipping his newly acquired elephant, assaulting his wife and taking his jealousy to murderous extremes.

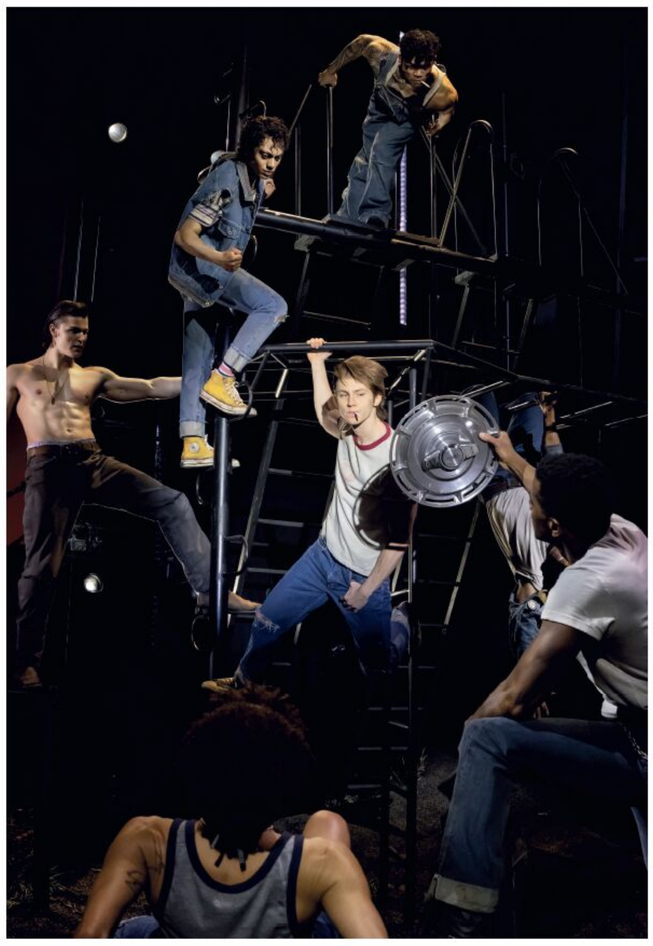
The supporting players emerge as more distinctive, including Broadway vet Gregg Edelman as an older Jacob who hovers about the action in an awkward framing device, Joe De Paul as a clown who wrenches genuine laughs out of well-trod material, and Sara Gettelfinger as a cooch dancer turned den mother who cautions Jacob about romancing the boss's wife ('yer a balloon in a room full of pins').

The gently rootsy score sometimes matches the energy and cleverness of the spectacle-focused production numbers, as in a witty ode to circus deception, 'The Lion Has Got No Teeth', which recalls classic Kander and Ebb. But too many key dramatic songs feel like they've been written by committee – in this case, the seven-member PigPen Theatre Co. collective – with all of the personality and sharp edges sandpapered down to a blandly smooth finish. That's particularly true of the pleasing, but forgettable, ballads for the romantic leads which lack a poetic flourish to soar as singles or a specificity to deepen our understanding of either the characters or their plights. But when the characters step into that

Production credits – Water for Elephants

Cast Grant Gustin, Isabelle McCalla, Gregg Edelman, Paul Alexander Nolan, Stan Brown, Joe De Paul *et al*
Direction Jessica Stone
Choreography Jesse Robb, Shana Carroll
Music direction Elizabeth Doran
Music supervision, arrangements Mary-Mitchell Campbell, Benedict Braxton-Smith
Orchestrations Daryl Waters, August Eriksmoen, Benedict Braxton-Smith
Set Takeshi Kata
Lighting Bradley King
Costumes David Israel Reynoso
Projections David Bengali
Circus, puppet design Shana Carroll/Ray Wetmore & JR Goodman, Camille Labarre

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy



Standout score: Emma Pittman (Cherry) with Brody Grant, shouldering much of the show's success as Ponyboy; the cast breathes life into showstopping set-pieces

ring, and Stone conjures a bygone circus in all its sepia-toned glory, all our misgivings fade away like so many popcorn crumbs.

The Outsiders boasts its own showstopping set-pieces, but it stands out with a score, by Jonathan Clay and Zach Chance of the indie folk duo Jamestown Revival along with Justin Levine, that truly understands how to use songs to tell a story onstage. The infectiously jangly opening number, 'Tulsa '67', succeeds in ways that few modern Musical Theatre songs do: setting the scene in a particular time and place, introducing a broad range of characters in sharp detail and establishing the major themes of alienation and potential violence soon to be fleshed out. All in an irresistible tune featuring a plaintive melody, haunting harmonies, a syncopated hook and then a delayed foot-stomping chorus.

SE Hinton's first novel reads a bit like *West Side Story* fan fiction in its depiction of teenage 'greaser' outcasts in 1960s Oklahoma who spar with the snooty, better-off socs (pronounced 'soash', short for 'socials'). The tensions escalate when a sensitive greaser bookworm named Ponyboy Curtis (Brody Grant) forges a literary connection with preppy prom queen Cherry Valance (Emma Pittman, making the most of an underwritten role) – incensing her brutish soc boyfriend, Bob (Kevin William Paul).

It's a simple young adult-ish wisp of a story – the socs remain one-dimensional villains. But the adaptation, by acclaimed playwright Adam Rapp with Levine, manages to update the story (and improve on Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film) in canny ways. Ponyboy's go-to book is no longer *Gone With the Wind* but the more thematically apt *Great Expectations* – yielding a soaring and melodic 'I wish' song that encapsulates all of the character's yearnings for a better life. As Ponyboy explains, the Dickens yarn is about 'this orphan kid named Pip who falls in love with a rich girl. And there's this pretty tough outlaw character who takes him under his wing'. That tough outlaw, an outwardly gruff ex-jailbird named Dallas (Joshua Boone), also meets a fate that's less problematic and politically charged *c*2024.

> "The show sparkles not just as an adaptation but as a genuinely great American musical"

Rapp's biggest improvement may be the fleshing out of Ponyboy's older brother Darrel, who's dropped out of school after an auto accident killed their parents and now struggles to keep Ponyboy and middle son Sodapop (Jason Schmidt) fed, clothed and out of trouble – even as Ponyboy and his pal Johnny (Sky Lakota-Lynch) go on the lam after a street fight turns deadly. Brent Comer brings anguish to the role and his smooth but searing baritone elevates some of the most effective story-songs.

Despite his reservations, even Darrel is drawn into the climactic Act Two rumble – which director Danya Taymor stages in an electrifying, rain-drenched scene that showcases Rick and Jeff Kuperman's muscular choreography and Brian MacDevitt's striking lighting design. Taymor also deploys a simple, stylised set that seamlessly transforms a drive-in theatre into a barn or an abandoned church. Moreover, the stagecraft helps to disguise some of the plot weaknesses, particularly in Act Two.

Much of the show's success rests on the slender shoulders of Brody Grant, a Broadway newbie who is onstage nearly the entire show as Ponyboy. Though he looks older than his 14-year-old character (even older than C Thomas Howell did in Coppola's movie), he conveys the restlessness and confusion of a young not-quite man trapped in a dilemma that has spiralled far out of his control. Grant's earnest, expressive face and soaring tenor connects you to the character and his journey from the opening number.

The Outsiders sparkles not just as an adaptation but a genuinely great American musical. The songs feel like organic engines driving a tragic story of class conflict and brotherly love to onstage moments with real heft. Plus, they boast a country-inflected energy and lyrics that match the plainspoken poetry of Robert Frost, another all-American writer that Ponyboy memorably namechecks. Who says that nothing gold can stay?

Thom Geier

Production credits – The Outsiders

Cast Brody Grant, Sky Lakota-Lynch, Joshua Boone, Brent Comer, Jason Schmidt, Emma Pittman, Daryl Tofa, Kevin William Paul, Dan Berry *et al*
Direction Danya Taymor
Choreography Rick Kuperman, Jeff Kuperman
Music direction Matt Hinkley
Orchestrations Justin Levine, Matt Hinkley
Arrangements Justin Levine
Set AMP featuring Tatiana Kahvegian
Lighting Brian MacDevitt
Sound Cody Spencer
Costumes Sarafina Bush
Hair, wigs Alberto Alvarado
Projections Hana S Kim
Special effects Jeremy Chernick, Lillis Meeh

The Wiz & The Who's Tommy

The Wiz

Charlie Smalls music, lyrics
William F Brown book **Amber Ruffin** adaptation
Marquis Theatre, New York 29 March 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 13 APRIL 2024

The Who's Tommy

Pete Townshend music, lyrics
Pete Townshend, Des McAnuff book
Nederlander Theatre, New York 8 March 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 23 MARCH 2024

Kyle Ramar Freeman, Nichelle Lewis, Phillip Johnson Richardson and Avery Wilson ease on down the road; Deborah Cox plays Glinda; Wayne Brady as The Wiz

Bellbottoms may never have made a comeback, but other relics of the 1970s still hold a nostalgic appeal – even if there are elements of pop culture from that decade that require considerably more effort to translate to modern audiences. How much to update? How much to leave alone? That tension is at the heart of two Broadway revivals that both struggle to live up to (and transcend) their '70s origins – and the awkward memory of star-studded film adaptations.

The Wiz, a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* originally billed as 'the super soul musical,' first premiered nearly a half-century ago and swept the 1975 Tony Awards, winning seven prizes, including Best Musical. The show revolutionised the depiction of African Americans in Musical Theatre, in part because it tapped the talents of Black artists both onstage and off. There had been other Black-themed musicals, but these had mostly been the product of well-meaning white creators: 1968 Tony winner *Hallelujah, Baby!* was 'a chronicle of the African American struggle for equality' with a book by Arthur Laurents and a score by Jule Styne with lyricists Adolph Green and Betty Comden. Even the 1974 Tony winner, a musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*, owed its creation to an all-white writing and composing team.

The Wiz deliberately broke the mould, boasting not only an all-Black cast (including budding Motown star Stephanie Mills as Dorothy) but a score by Black composer Charlie Smalls that leaned on R&B and soul idioms to provide a new musical framework to tell a familiar, public-domain story.

Tunes like 'Ease on Down the Road' became actual radio hits, proof of how an updated approach to Broadway songwriting could still cross over into the mainstream.

Smalls's tunes, which range from soulful ballads to gospel-inflected calls to uplift, get only a modest update in the latest iteration of *The Wiz*, an affectionate but underwhelming revival that too often feels like it's easing down a road that it should be tearing up.

> "Nichelle Lewis shows no hestitation in her multiple solos...with a bright, clear voice"

Amber Ruffin has streamlined and polished William F Brown's original book, updating some of the language to be less 'jivey' but still evoke the African American experience. Ozians are no longer called Munchkins, and Kyle Ramar Freeman's Lion isn't apprehended by a badge-wielding Mice Squad. Now we get references to karaoke, self-care and Lawry's seasoning – and the wicked witch Evillene admits her water phobia stems in part from what it will do to her silk press. Melody A Betts brings a guttural growl to Evillene's big number, 'No Bad News,' but weirdly she's also tapped to play the sweet Aunt Em in the monochrome-seeming opening scene. (The original Broadway production cast two actresses, while Off-Broadway's Encores! revival in 2009 had LaChanze play both Em and good witch Glinda, a more natural Oz-world parallel.)

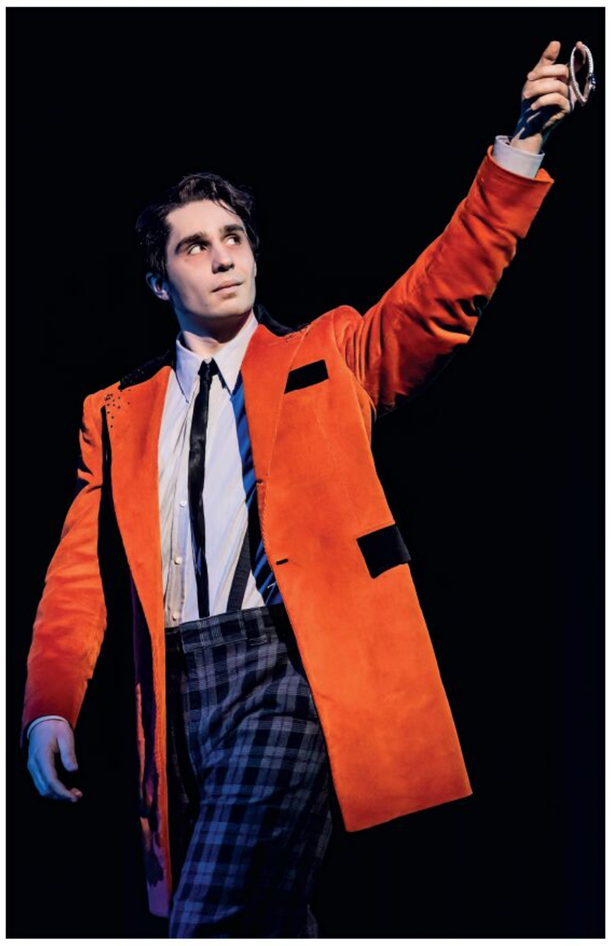
Nichelle Lewis projects a sweet innocence as Dorothy, and she shows no hesitation delivering her multiple solos (especially the curtain-closer, 'Home') with a bright, clear voice. But her singing (and that of several of the performers) is overpowered by the 19-member orchestra under conductor Paul Byssainthe Jr. (It seems sound designer Jon Weston hasn't adjusted for the cavernous space of Broadway's Marquis Theatre.) When Lewis's voice isn't getting lost in the musical numbers, she herself seems to be receding into the background – she seldom seizes our attention even when she's speaking. The other supporting players fare better: Deborah Cox as the runway-ready good witch Glinda, Avery Wilson as the athletic Scarecrow and Wayne Brady as the shady Wiz. Phillip Johnson Richardson is a standout as the Tin Man, replacing the traditional tap routine with a more contemporary techno dance break.

Too often, though, this *Wiz* seems to skimp on magic. Director Schele Williams's production has played 13 US cities since last fall, lumbering onto Broadway with the look and feel of a touring production, with streamlined sets (by Hannah Beachler) and colourful projections (by Daniel Brodie) that feel decidedly low-fi and paint-by-numbers

Production credits – The Wiz

Cast Nichelle Lewis, Wayne Brady, Deborah Cox, Melody A Betts, Kyle Ramar Freeman, Phillip Johnson Richardson, Avery Wilson *et al*
Direction Schele Williams
Choreography JaQuel Knight
Music direction Paul Byssainthe Jr
Orchestrations, arrangements Joseph Joubert
Set Hannah Beachler
Lighting Ryan J O'Gara
Sound Jon Weston
Costumes Sharen Davis
Hair, wigs Charles G LaPointe
Projections Daniel Brodie

PHOTOGRAPHY: Jeremy Daniel / Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman



The Walkers (Alison Luff and Adam Jacobs) and young son Tommy (Olive Ross-Kline); Ali Louis Bourzgui (centre) in the titular role; Bobby Conte as Cousin Kevin

for the Main Stem. (Still, a hat tip to Beachler for putting a '227' address label on one of the brownstones when Dorothy first lands in Oz.) JaQuel Knight's choreography is heavy on hip-hop influences, particularly in the club-ready second-act opener, but even the Act One chorus of twirling tornados (costumes by Sharen Davis) remains, like the show itself, stubbornly earthbound.

The team behind *The Who's Tommy* faced a different challenge bringing the rock opera back to Broadway 55 years after the British band's concept album and 30 years after the original stage version. How do you present such dated material for audiences who may be unfamiliar with the post-World War Two reference points?

Des McAnuff, who directed and co-conceived the 1992 musical, has reimagined Pete Townshend's story as a more timeless fable about a boy whose battle with early trauma leads to some very specialised fame.

McAnuff treats the Nederlander Theatre like a glorified gamer's ideal screen, with floating windows and moving set-pieces and stylised projections that mimic the sensory overload of immersive VR games. Kids may not play pinball anymore (or use politically incorrect phrases like 'deaf, dumb and blind') but they know all about the allure of gaming.

David Korins's *Tron*-like set design, Sarafina Bush's costumes and Amanda Zieve's almost surgical lighting underscore the connection, while Peter Nigrini's projections are hit or miss: he provides some jaw-dropping stagecraft for an early scene of Tommy's father as a World War Two paratrooper (Adam Jacobs) leaping from a plane after leaving behind his pregnant wife (Alison Luff). Occasionally, though, Nigrini resorts to a kind of cliché-ridden decorative wallpaper. (Do we need to see Lux soap boxes floating above Tommy's family's laundry room?) The primary directive seems to be to avoid the pause button at all costs.

Newcomer Ali Louis Bourzgui makes a charismatic impression as the grown-up Tommy, at first a wounded and dazed bystander who gradually comes into his rock-star persona. With his soaring falsetto and fondness for tight, Steve Jobs-like turtlenecks, he more than owns the spotlight. He'd fit right in on a Twitch channel where he could divulge episodes from his miserable upbringing as he levels up.

> "It makes a strong case for how this music and story might endure for generations"

McAnuff doesn't shrink from showing our hero's trigger warnings: his veteran dad, thought to be killed in action, returns and shoots his wife's new lover dead in front of young Tommy – who takes the instruction to shut up about what's happened literally. (Two young actors alternate in the roles of Tommy at age four and 10, both donning unfortunate wigs by Charles G LaPointe that suggest a brunette Harpo Marx.) Soon, the boy finds himself the prey of a paedophilic uncle (John Ambrosino) and a bullying cousin (Bobby Conte) – only to belatedly open up when he discovers his gaming prowess.

Aside from Bourzgui, the rest of the cast makes less of an impression here – that's a departure from the star-studded original production, which marked the Broadway debut of future stars like Michael Cerveris (as Tommy) as well as ensemble players like Alice Ripley, Norm Lewis and Sherie Rene Scott. Christina Sajous belts seductively as the notorious Acid Queen, a junkie whom Captain Walker foolishly takes Tommy to visit in hopes of curing him of his troubles, but it's hard to compete with how Tina Turner owned that signature number in Ken Russell's star-studded 1975 movie.

No matter. There's a lot to enjoy here, starting with the driving guitar-forward rock score and a narrative that connects less with individual characters than with the larger issues of ingrained domestic trauma, isolation and the scrutiny of prying media. McAnuff's onstage use of mirrors, which could veer into cliché for their Freudian symbolism, retain a powerful pull. And his smartly imagined new take on *Tommy* makes a strong case for how this music, and this story, might endure for generations.

Thom Geier

Production credits – The Who's Tommy

Cast Ali Louis Bourzgui, Alison Luff, Adam Jacobs, John Ambrosino, Bobby Conte, Christina Sajous *et al*
Direction Des McAnuff
Choreography Lorin Latarro
Music direction Rick Fox
Orchestrations Steve Margoshes
Set David Korins
Lighting Amanda Zieve
Sound Gareth Owen
Costumes Sarafina Bush
Hair, wigs Charles G LaPointe
Projections Peter Nigrini

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Recording reviews

The latest Musical Theatre recordings, reviewed by our esteemed panel of experts

42 Balloons

STUDIO CAST RECORDING

Jack Godfrey
music, lyrics, book

"The songs drive the narrative, setting up an infectious 'groove'"

Cast Charlie McCullagh, Evelyn Hoskins, Gillian Hardie, Lejaun Sheppard *et al*

Music supervision, orchestrations
Sam Featherstone, Joe Beighton

Music direction Flynn Sturgeon

Absolute Records
RELEASED 19 MARCH 2024

Larry Walters (Charlie McCullagh) is hellbent on flying in Jack Godfrey's heat-of-the-moment, infectious 42 Balloons

I don't think I've had as much fun with a set of songs since *SIX* rocked my boat. The triple-threat Jack Godfrey – responsible for book, music and lyrics – is the most natural of practitioners and if you were to ask me what it is in particular about the material that makes it shine I would have to say that it has that rare heat-of-the-moment feeling which absolutely doesn't draw attention to itself and yet has you hitting 'repeat' for a second shot every time. It never sounds overworked and every song brings you up to speed with the storytelling.

Eight numbers are offered on this brilliantly produced EP, and having not yet seen the show, I'm taken by the way they drive the narrative, setting up an infectious 'groove' for the whole production. Insidiously catchy hooks abound and the first of them is right there in the 'Prologue' where the whacky premise of the show – a true happening, stranger than fiction – is laid out in three minutes flat. They say musicals are only as good as the idea that inspires them and this one entices you to go along for the ride, even if it is 16,000 feet above Los Angeles in a lawn chair.

The vibe of the score chimes with the date of the 'incident' (1982) and we really get into the soul of that period with the number 'Somebody's Story' which provides a power vocal, seized gratefully by Gillian Hardie. There's a rap element to '42 Balloons and a Lawn Chair' as the live commentary of the event unfolds, as it were, in real time. It's sharp, funny, lyric writing.

I'm already very taken with Charlie McCullagh who plays Larry Walters, the man hellbent on flying, and the 'Big Balloon' opener has all the dynamism and belief to draw us into his sky's-the-limit dream. Evelyn Hoskins (check out my podcast for *Musicals*) – as his long-suffering partner Carol Van Deusen – gets arguably the key number in the score: a bittersweet cracker called 'Helium' which by some mysterious alchemy I can't get enough of. I need to see the show now and I need to get more of Jack Godfrey.

Edward Seckerson

Figaro: An Original Musical

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Ashley Jana music, lyrics
Ashley Jana, Will Nunziata
concept, book

"The mysterious and sensuous vibe is maintained throughout most of the album"

Cast Mauricio Martínez, Cayleigh Capaldi, Ashley Jana, T Oliver Reid, Jayke Workman, Benjamin Pajak, Lily Bell Morgan

Producers Ashley Jana, Will Nunziata, Van Dean, Mia Moravis

Orchestrations, arrangements
Ashley Jana

Center Stage Records
RELEASED 1 MARCH 2024

The album cover for *Figaro* enticingly encapsulates the vibe of this mysterious, brand-new musical. Dark and seductive, this is a recording that may appeal to those who love megamusicals like *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Jekyll & Hyde*. Set in mid-1800s Italy, the period environment comes through in the music mostly in its sonic placing that's similar to these mysterious and

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

Recording Figaro: Cayleigh Capaldi as Sienna, with writer/producer Will Nunziata; T Oliver Reid as Antonio; Mauricio Martinez as a smooth, seductive Figaro

dramatic period musicals. This show, which receives its world premiere with two concert performances at the London Palladium in February 2025, also features a heroine who is mistreated and manipulated by a mysterious showman.

Figaro is the work of singer-songwriter Ashley Jana and award-winning theatre director Will Nunziata. Jana describes the score as a fusion between pop and Musical Theatre sound worlds. The title song is evocative and demonstrates the fusion well. The songs fly in pop ballad mode, such as 'No More', protagonist Sienna's 'I Want' song near the start. The enigmatic and sensuous vibe is maintained throughout most of the recording, with the pace of all the songs seemingly emerging from the gradual teasing out of the thriller-esque plotline.

The album is epic in multiple senses of the word: the structure would imply that music plays a large role in the stage show, with some shorter sections of song interspersed amongst dialogue also included alongside the more expansive musical numbers. Several of the songs end on an unresolved cliffhanger, presumably propelling forward into the next part of the action in the live version of the show. The orchestration is piano-led and resides in an epic landscape of lush strings, pads and choir, continually evoking a pop take on the megamusical kind of sound world.

This is magnified on the album by the use of reverb, giving the soundtrack an otherworldly quality. Occasionally the electronic aspect is given more prominence, such as the introduction to 'Dreams Come True (Reprise)' and also when depicting Sienna's shutdown moment in 'Already Yours (Reprise)'.

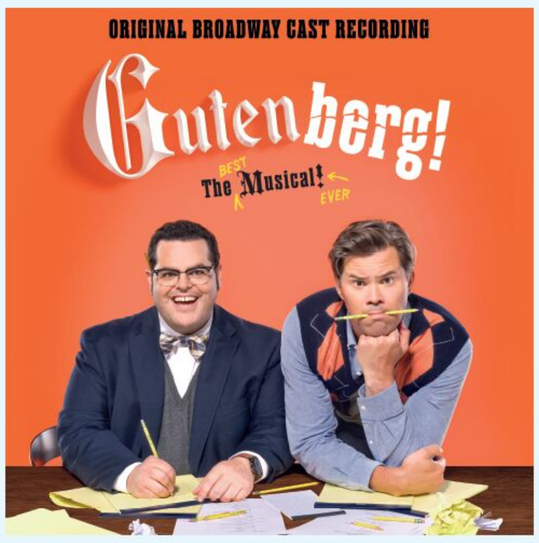
Special mention must be given to Cayleigh Capaldi's vocal sonority and dexterity shown in the astronomical vocal heights of 'I'll Sing for You (Reprise)'. Mauricio Martínez also shines with smooth, seductive vocals as Figaro, and the blend of the two performers together is particularly effective in the intoxicating duet 'Already Yours'; a song that encapsulates the tone and idiom of this world-premiere album.

Rebecca Applin

Gutenberg! The Musical!

ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING

Scott Brown, Anthony King
music, lyrics, book



"The comedic instincts are a masterclass in timing and ingenuity"

Cast Josh Gad, Andrew Rannells
Music director, conductor Marco Paguia
Arrangements, orchestrations, music supervision TO Sterrett
Center Stage Records
RELEASED DIGITALLY 3 MAY 2024; ON CD 17 MAY 2024

The two exclamation points in the title of *Gutenberg! The Musical!* offer a clue that we're in for some cheeky fun. The antic two-hander's recent Broadway run has been memorialised in a cast recording that captures the chief pleasure of that production – specifically the chance to spend time in the company of two supremely talented Musical Theatre clowns who will stop at absolutely nothing to get a laugh.

Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells were the original Broadway leads in *The Book of Mormon* where they discovered the whacky alchemy that happens when Gad's cartoonish baritenor meets Rannells's volatile high belt. *Gutenberg!* capitalises on that phenomenon and dials it up a few notches.

They play a writing team (in addition to a dizzying array of secondary characters) hellbent on creating a musical about the invention of the printing press. If joke piled upon joke is your thing, you're gonna love this recording. Others may find the relentless shenanigans a bit fatiguing.

Composers/lyricists Scott Brown and Anthony King use the medieval-ish Teutonic setting as their launching pad to craft a score recalling the jocularity

Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells, masters of comic timing in the madcap adventure that is Gutenberg! The Musical! – now available as an audio-only extravaganza

and mortification admixture of *Spamalot* and *Urinetown*. That the tunes are not especially distinguished is almost beside the point, larded as they are with references to the Musical Theatre canon. TO Sterrett's sly, spare arrangements for a four-member band underscore every allusion.

The major rub of the recording is that, stripped of visuals, the humour doesn't always land as riotously as it must have in the theatre. Also, many tracks feature extensive direct address to the listener to fill in the plot and explicate Musical Theatre conventions. Midway through, I found myself impatient to get on with the actual songs. That said, the stars' comedic instincts are so spot on that I can imagine a whole generation of aspiring performers studying and memorising every pause and intonation as a masterclass in timing and unbridled ingenuity.

The strongest cuts are the loopier ones that wander all over the musicological map in their indefatigable endeavour to entertain. The rousing Act One closer 'Tomorrow is Tonight' sounds like *Book of Mormon*'s 'Tomorrow is a Latter Day' rewritten by Billy Joel in friskily pianistic mode. 'Monk With Me' has Gad channelling Tim Curry, Colm Wilkinson, Carol Channing, Michael Crawford *and* Idina Menzel. The 11 o'clock number '(Might as Well) Go to Hell' features Rannells chewing the scenery glam-rocker style while Gad provides a chirpy descant as a pack of rats. Yeah, it's that kind of show.

Jim Munson

My Favorite Things

THE RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN 80TH ANNIVERSARY CONCERT

> "Julian Ovenden sings with ardour and dramatic conviction"

Cast Joanna Ampil, Michael Ball, Maria Friedman, Lily Kerhoas, Daniel Dae Kim, Audra McDonald, Julian Ovenden, Lucy St Louis, Aaron Tveit, Marisha Wallace *et al*
The Rodgers & Hammerstein Concert Orchestra
Conductor Simon Lee
Concord Theatricals
RELEASED 31 MAY 2024

Eighty years after Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein wrote their first show, *Oklahoma!*, a starry cast at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane celebrated their groundbreaking Musical Theatre collaboration. Given that this live recording features 42 tracks, it's unsurprising that some work better than others. Several are incomplete, necessarily trimmed so as to to cover more of the huge Rodgers and Hammerstein catalogue and create flow in an evening of songs shorn of their surrounding scenes – which, ironically, was what made the partnership so groundbreaking.

Further cuts have also been made to fit everything onto disc. The worst choice is taking *Carousel* hero Billy's defining seven-minute 'Soliloquy' – a thrilling scene in solo sung by Aaron Tveit – and slashing it to one minute. Luckily, he also gets a complete 'Younger Than Springtime' from *South Pacific*.

Occasionally, some performers weaken material via vocal mannerisms and, with the suitably lush accompaniment of a 40-piece session orchestra, a few experienced names – let's spare their blushes – cannot resist showing off money notes at the expense of the lyric's intent.

On the other hand, while Marisha Wallace might outrage purists with her ballsy, knock-'em-dead 'I Cain't Say No' – which she sang in Daniel Fish's recent wholesale rethink of *Oklahoma!* – it's so wonderfully thought-through and gloriously sung that doubts vanish. She

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy / Tristram Kenton

also changes tack with a more deliciously by-the-book version of 'The Gentleman is a Dope', the standout from *Allegro*. Performances like that ensure that the recording's highlights are genuinely high.

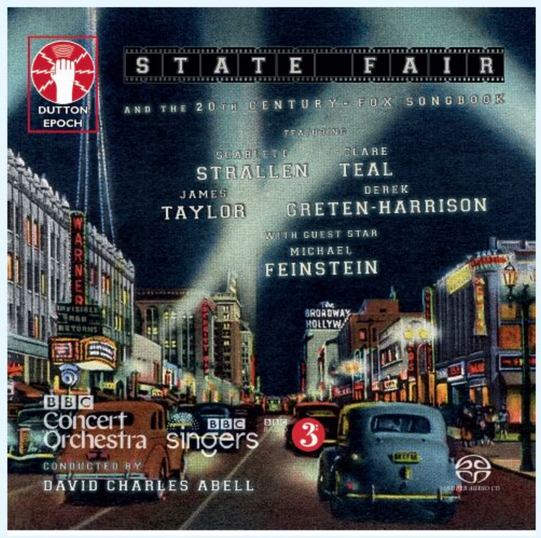
Lily Kerhoas and Patrick Wilson rise tenderly to the musical and dramatic challenges of 'If I Loved You', the bench scene from *Carousel*. But the single most dynamic performance is Julian Ovenden's concentrated slow burn through 'This Nearly Was Mine' from *South Pacific*. Sung with ardour, absolute technical control and utter dramatic conviction with an epic finish, you can hear he knows not just the song but its drama. Other singers, take note.

There are a few indulgent tempi under Simon Lee, but his players clearly enjoy the orchestral numbers. Some casting choices amusing in concert are less convincing on a recording. Audra McDonald's grand voice rather flattens the song that gives this album its title but she makes up for it with a lovely 'Mister Snow' – in a role that made her a star in Nicholas Hytner's celebrated 1990s revival of *Carousel* – while the arrangement of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain' is in the perfect key for her powerhouse voice to achieve lift-off. Her passion just grows and grows, making the beloved song the recording's ideal climax.

David Benedict

State Fair and the 20th Century-Fox Songbook

Various lyrics, music



> The sumptuous orchestral sweeps and catchy melodies make the runtime fly by

Cast Scarlett Strallen, Clare Teal, James Taylor, Derek Greten-Harrison, Michael Feinstein
BBC Singers;
BBC Concert Orchestra
Conductor David Charles Abell
Dutton Epoch
RELEASED 22 MARCH

Many readers may be familiar with *State Fair*, Rodgers and Hammerstein's only score specifically written for the big screen. This album also features many long-forgotten relics from other movie musicals produced by 20th Century-Fox during the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the original sheet music of the time has been lost, due to being swiftly discarded after each film's release. Therefore, it's no wonder

A host of stars including Julian Ovenden (centre) pay tribute to the songwriting genius of Rodgers and Hammerstein across 42 tracks on a new, live recording

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that much of this music has not been heard (let alone recorded) outside of its original release. It is thanks to musicologist and baritone Derek Greten-Harrison's extensive research and restorations that this music can be heard in its original glory (and in surround sound) once again.

Greten-Harrison also lends his voice to the album, where he is joined by Scarlett Strallen, Clare Teal, James Taylor and Michael Feinstein. Each has a distinct voice that gives great variety and colour to each of the songs; with no visual cues or context, they inject life into the numbers. Holding everything together is the BBC Concert Orchestra, masterfully conducted by David Charles Abell – together they are able to capture that grand Hollywood sound while maintaining the intricate moments of lighter orchestration. The few instrumental tracks shine and are pleasant tonics to the vocal numbers.

Highlights include 'That's For Me' from *State Fair*, where Teal lends her warm alto tones to one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's greatest melodies. From the same film, 'All I Owe Ioway' is a raucous all-company number that can't help but make you smile. With glass harmonicas, mouth harps and ocarinas evoking the rural Midwest, there are flavours of the duo's *Oklahoma!*

Strallen balances the comedic with the delicate in 'Always The Lady' from *Three Little Girls in Blue*, effortlessly floating across the leaping melody (and in multiple languages too!). 'Run, Little Raindrop, Run' from *Springtime in the Rockies* is brought to life by Feinstein's sonorous tones, who makes a great pairing with Strallen. A special mention must also be made of the BBC Singers, who are able to evoke that iconic 1940s sound with such depth and clarity – the sound is much more than a monolith of voices.

The double-CD album comprises 41 tracks, and it's easy to get lost in a Golden Age stupor – the sumptuous orchestral sweeps and catchy melodies make the two-hour runtime fly by. It is accompanied by a 27-page booklet written by Greten-Harrsion with detailed insights into these numbers. At the time of writing, this album is only available as a physical release, which is a great shame as these lost classics should be heard by all.

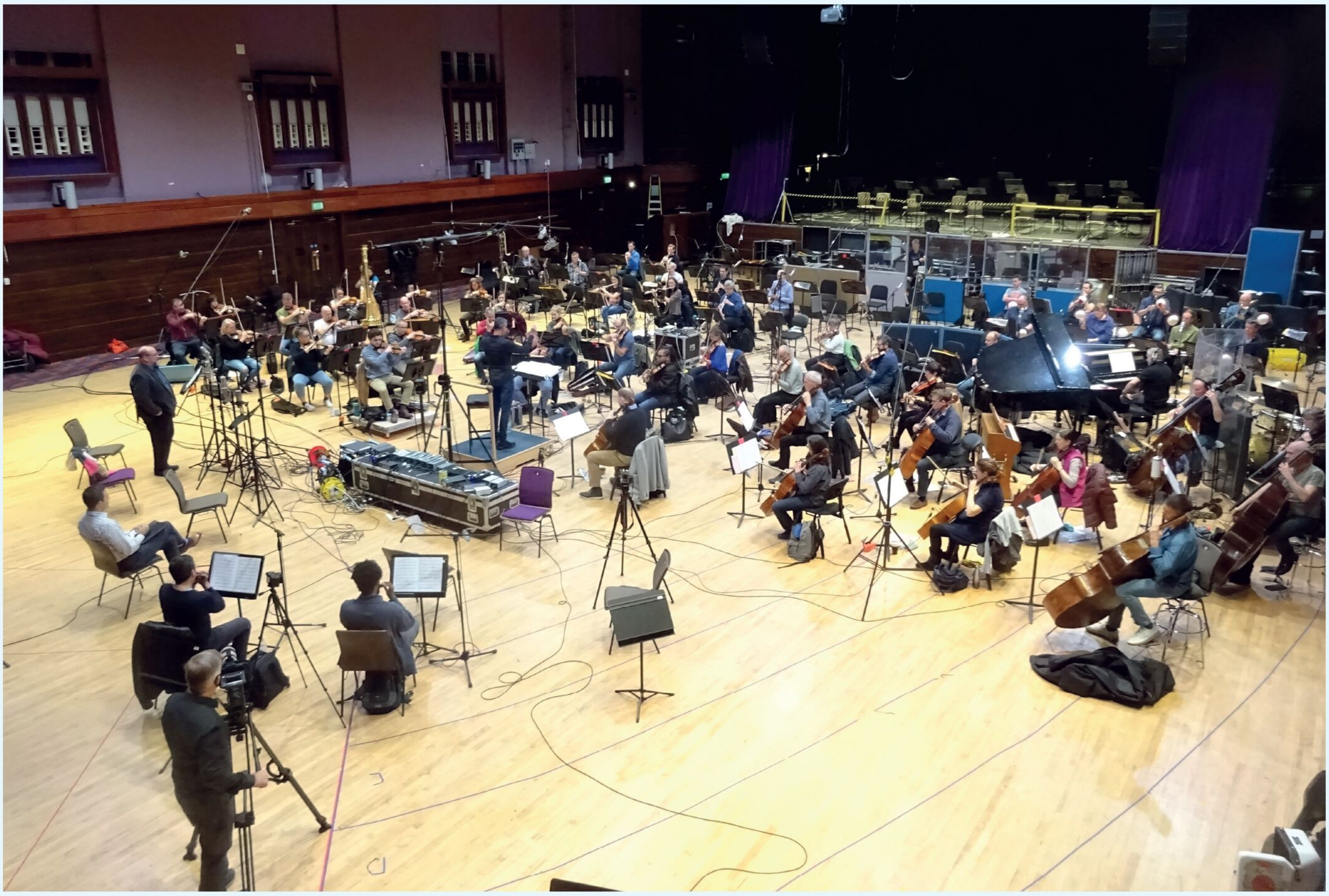
Jonathan Whiting

Water for Elephants

ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING
PigPen Theatre Co.
music, lyrics **Rick Elice** book

> "The richly harmonic orchestrations constantly captivate and surprise"

Cast Grant Gustin, Paul Alexander Nolan, Isabelle McCalla, Greg Edelman, Sara Gettelfinger *et al*
Music director
Elizabeth Doran
Music supervision, arrangements
Mary-Mitchell Campbell, Benedict Braxton-Smith
Orchestrations
Daryl Waters, Benedict Braxton-Smith, August Eriksmoen
Ghostlight Records
RELEASED DIGITALLY
17 MAY 2024

I really didn't know what to expect from the Broadway cast recording of *Water for Elephants*, unfamiliar as I was with its seven-man composing team known collectively as PigPen Theatre Co., perhaps best known for being part of Trevor Nunn's first American acting company.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Lewis Foreman

Recording State Fair: the BBC Concert Orchestra, conducted by David Charles Abell, and a starry line-up of performers who capture that grand Hollywood sound

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To reinterpret these songs, a team of international artists was assembled: Broadway and West End star Scarlett Strallen, British jazz vocalist Clare Teal, American tenor James Taylor, baritone and musicologist Derek Greten-Harrison, and guest star Michael Feinstein. They are backed by the BBC Concert Orchestra and the BBC Singers under the direction of David Charles Abell.

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Water for Elephants: a compellingly listenable score, not only hearkening back to country, folk, bluegrass, honky-tonk… but Cy Coleman and Kander and Ebb too

What a delightful surprise, then, to discover that they've created one of the most compellingly listenable new scores I've heard in quite some time. The recording transports us from its rousing opener all the way through to its understated finale, as hopeful and sad and raucous and yearning as life itself.

The musical is based on the bestselling novel (and movie) of the same name about the travails of a hardscrabble, itinerant circus during the Great Depression, with a trio of troubled souls at its centre. Reflecting its setting, PigPen's score hearkens back to all manner of Americana, including country, folk, bluegrass, honky-tonk, even some Sousa marches and – fortunately for Musical Theatre lovers – extends its reach into brassy Cy Coleman and vampy Kander and Ebb territory. If the plainspoken lyrics are hardly Sondheim-clever, they aptly match the earthy approach to the music.

The supporting cast sings like a dream, contributing vivid solos and shimmery harmonies, but it is the three leads who really shine. Paul Alexander Nolan as the volatile ringmaster imbues this vexatious character with nuance and humanity, and dispatches rapid-fire lyrics with panache. Baritone Grant Gustin as the new guy in the circus has a gorgeously expressive upper register that can go from sweet introspection to full emotional breakdown without sacrificing tone or sounding forced. Isabelle McCalla makes an indelible impression as the men's shared love interest. Her smoky mezzo carries an innate melancholy reminiscent of Emmylou Harris, yet she is also capable of opening up to a thrillingly theatrical belt as her numbers build.

What really sets this recording apart, however, is the extraordinary care that has been lavished on the instrumentation in support of the vocals. The richly harmonic orchestrations and arrangements for a chameleonic band of 12 by Mary-Mitchell Campbell, Benedict Braxton-Smith, Daryl Waters and August Eriksmoen contain so much depth and variation that they constantly captivate and surprise. The twang of a banjo may be complemented by a mournful cello, a whimsical flugelhorn grounded by the minor-chord strum of an acoustic guitar. Propulsive percussion supplies an underlying heartbeat and brings a contemporary feel to the music that raises it above a mere exercise in nostalgia while lending cohesiveness to the disparate historical references.

Jim Munson

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy

White Girl in Danger

ORIGINAL OFF-BROADWAY CAST RECORDING
Michael R Jackson
music, lyrics, book
Various artists
Orchestrations Lynne Shankel
Music direction, supervision Meg Zervoulis
Yellow Sound Label
RELEASED 29 MARCH 2024

> "Jackson has a flair for witty wordplay and hook-heavy pop pastiche"

Cast Latoya Edwards, Tarra Conner Jones, Liz Lark Brown, James Jackson Jr, Eric William Morris *et al*

Michael R Jackson's follow-up to *A Strange Loop* is a messily ambitious satire of 1990s soap operas that again centres on a meta-narrative about the historic exclusion of non-white, non-straight voices from US popular culture.

The album sleeve notes for *White Girl in Danger*, which had a short Off-Broadway run in 2023, thankfully include all the name-dropping, neologism-filled lyrics (the Black characters are 'Blackground' performers who espouse 'interblacktional bleminism' to dismantle the 'allwhitetriarchy') that may be hard to pick out just from listening. The booklet also includes a lengthy author's manifesto from Jackson laying out his intentions. (It's a message that's underscored in the fourth-wall-busting penultimate number, a quasi-spoken word vamp thoughtfully delivered by James Jackson Jr, who's mostly on the periphery until his big number.)

All that marginalia is helpful to digest a show that often tries to jam in too many narrative threads, and 'Capital-I' Ideas. We get three white teen characters named Megan, Meagan, and Maegan (Molly Hager, Alyse Alan Louis and Lauren Macus), for instance, each with an exasperated mother and a boyfriend who's creepy in a slightly different way. On the plus side, that means we get hilarious and catchy songs like 'Basic' and 'Let's Party' that offer vocal variations on a panoply of female '90s pop stars, from belty Christina Aguilera to bubbly Cyndi Lauper to angsty Alanis Morissette.

Tarra Conner Jones's soulful vocals are the real highlight of Michael R Jackson's White Girl in Danger, while the recording turns out to be a slightly mixed bag

Jackson has a flair for witty worldplay ('Our only clue is a kernel! Our GPS is maternal') and for hook-heavy pop pastiche, and the best of his songs here tempt you to think this could be a jukebox musical. Lynne Shankel's orchestrations add her period-perfect use of electric guitar riffs, xylophone and synthesiser which underscore the throwback sound. Unfortunately, the recording occasionally feels like a rush job, with a muddy quality that recalls a third-generation mixtape. Worse, even mega-talented singers like Tarra Conner Jones and Latoya Edwards – who play the mother-daughter 'Blackground' players who begin to break into the soap's main storyline – can be heard straining for some high notes. Could they not have been given one more take?

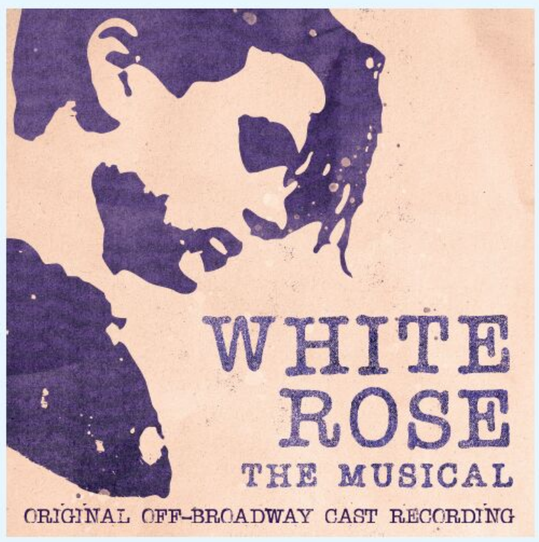
Even so, Jones's soulful vocals are the real highlight here – and she gets a roof-rattling, gospel-tinged solo, 'Why I Kill,' that showcases her deliciously throaty vibrato and effortless ability to flip from a rich chest voice to ethereal falsetto. (It's also a loving homage to Motormouth Maybelle's anthemic 'I Know Where I've Been' from *Hairspray*.)

Jones brings an earth-mother authenticity to a show that often leans on clever but overly elaborate artifice.

Thom Geier

White Rose The Musical

ORIGINAL OFF-BROADWAY CAST RECORDING
Natalie Brice music
Brian Belding lyrics, book



"The performances here evoke a sense of immediacy"

Cast Jo Ellen Pellman, Mike Cefalo, Kennedy Kanagawa *et al*
Orchestrations Charlie Rosen
Producers Charlie Rosen, Michael Croiter, Will Nunziata
Executive producers Van Dean, Jeff Lauriantis
Music direction Sheela Ramesh
Yellow Sound Label
RELEASED 3 MAY 2024

The album of the powerful new musical *White Rose* by Natalie Brice and Brian Belding tells the heart-breaking story of the university students of the White Rose movement that operated between 1942-43. Led by Sophie and Hans Scholl, the White Rose published and distributed pamphlets to publicly denounce the Nazi regime and to inspire resistance. The musical debuted Off Broadway in January this year, and the album records the performances of this original cast, evoking a sense of immediacy and aliveness.

The story of struggle and defiance is portrayed through a mixture of Musical Theatre and rock sound worlds. The team has a gift for integrated musical sequences: 'Munich' and 'Blind Eye/My Calling' both successfully navigate the path of storytelling through music, fusing dialogue and sensitive underscore which evolves naturally to evoke each moment of the story. In 'Munich', the high stakes are hinted at right from the beginning, and there is a sense of restless urgency in the music from the off. 'I Don't Care', the second song of the album, introduces the musical language of rock; a contrast to the opening number and presumably as a metaphorically appropriate sound world to convey the theme of resistance.

Rock returns at times throughout the show, such as in 'The Sheep Chose a Wolf' when Hans admits his former involvement with the Hitler Youth, and in 'Pride and Shame', a key moment in the movement's resistance. The rock style encapsulates the energy of the White Rose to inspire others. It also conveys the life blood running through the small movement and their desire to fight for truth.

However, there are also many emotive ballads, including 'Truth', 'Run Away', 'Stars' and 'Fatherhood', through to 'Who Cares?,' which is the highpoint of emotional yearning as the two arrested siblings await their fate. These ballads highlight the beautiful orchestrations by Charlie Rosen, making the most of the colour and shade of the show's chamber orchestra. Instrumental choices are deliberately and skilfully made in the score, delineating rock and more classical Musical Theatre numbers dramatically.

The final song 'We Will Not Be Silent' carries an important and powerful message for today's audience. As in 'Pride and Shame,' quotes from the White Rose's pamphlets are woven into the text, with the courageous figures from the past singing into our present through a powerful ballad, which kindles in the listener the motivation to find their own way to resist evil and oppression.

Rebecca Applin

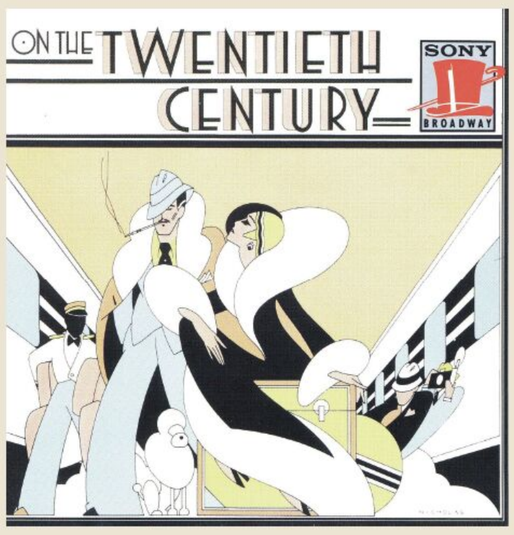
PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc J Franklin / Don Hunstein, courtesy of Sony Music Photo Archives

Classic recording...

On the Twentieth Century

ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING

Cy Coleman music
Betty Comden, Adolph Green lyrics, book



"A high-gloss, high-energy, high-melodrama whirlwind of a score, fusing old Broadway and Hollywood lushness with grand operetta"

Cast Madeline Kahn, John Cullum, Imogene Coca, Kevin Kline, George Coe, Dean Dittman, George Lee Andrews, Judy Kaye *et al*
Musical director Paul Gemignani
Sony Broadway
RELEASED ON 1 MAY 1978

I have vivid memories of watching the great Betty Comden and Adolph Green – book writers and lyricists for this terrific show – absolutely floor a cabaret audience in Los Angeles with their rendition of the opening sequence in its entirety, the pair of them playing and singing *all* the parts like they'd just that moment conjured them up. I'd already loved the show and the artwork (!) and this was the proverbial cherry on my admiration.

The whole team – but most of all composer Cy Coleman – had taken a leaf or 20 from Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* playbook and fashioned a high-gloss, high-energy, high-melodrama whirlwind of a score, fusing old Broadway and Hollywood lushness with the friskiness and sentimentality of grand operetta. Gilbert and Sullivan's wit and catchiness (so beloved of the Gershwins) is in there too with numbers like that now-fabled opening, the 'She's a Nut' ensemble song, or the combative duet 'I've Got It All', where the heavenly Madeline Kahn and John Cullum seek to trump each other's withering put-downs.

Cullum, as the egomaniacal and lovably crooked Broadway producer Oscar Jaffee, sets out his stall with 'I Rise Again', giving it large, larger, largest. His ex-lover and one-time discovery Lily Garland (previously Mildred Plotka) sees Kahn go from gawky accompanist to Hollywood star, her coloratura growing more elaborate and Cunegonde-like as she does so. The plot hinges on Jaffee wooing his former lover into headlining his latest flop. Her initial response 'Never' might seem none too promising but we are reminded of their past love in the duet 'Our Private World' which is something that would not have disgraced the Hungarian-American operetta composer Sigmund Romberg. Coleman knew from whence he was coming.

All this takes place on the luxurious fabled cross-country train The Twentieth Century where we encounter a philandering congressman and an escaped lunatic Letitia Primrose – the blissful Imogene Coca – whose masquerade as a kind of Jehovah's Witness climaxes in one never-to-be-forgotten coup de théâtre which sees her spreadeagled on the front of the train.

The now classic Overture seeks to stop the show before it's even begun, gathering momentum with blasts of steam, and the clang of the locomotive bell suggesting it might be trying to catch up with the *Candide* Overture. Coleman, like Bernstein, was the most versatile of geniuses and this whole score is a highly calorific treat.

Edward Seckerson

Top Cy Coleman, Betty Comden, Adolph Green **Above** Kevin Kline, Madeline Kahn, Coleman, Green, Comden, John Cullum, Imogene Coca, Paul Gemignani

Show listings

Your guide to upcoming Musical Theatre shows, concerts and cabaret performances across the UK, the US and internationally

UK
London: West End, Off West End

ABBA Voyage
ABBA ARENA
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
abbavoyage.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
ADELPHI THEATRE
Booking until 22 Dec 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com

Babies
THE OTHER PALACE
31 May-14 Jul 2024
theotherpalace.co.uk

The Baker's Wife
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY
6 Jul-14 Sep 2024
menierchocolatefactory.com

Blippi: The Wonderful World Tour
HAROLD PINTER THEATRE
8 Jul-7 Sep 2024
atgtickets.com

The Book of Mormon
PRINCE OF WALES THEATRE
Booking until 4 Nov 2024
thebookofmormonmusical.com

Bradley Jaden
CADOGAN HALL
14-15 Jun 2024
cadoganhall.com

Cabaret
PLAYHOUSE THEATRE (KIT KAT CLUB)
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
kitkat.club

Carousel: A Concert
ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL
13 Jul 2024
southbankcentre.co.uk

The Choir of Man
ARTS THEATRE
Booking until 29 Sep 2024
choirofman.com

Closer to Heaven
THE TURBINE THEATRE
Until 30 Jun 2024
theturbinetheatre.com

CRAZY COQS
BRASSERIE ZEDEL

Bonnie Langford: Here's the Ladies + 'Comparing Notes' post-show interview with Edward Seckerson
3-4 Jun

What Would Julie Do?
12 Jun

Ellis Kirk
24 Jun

Lorna Luft
26, 27, 29 Jun & 1 Jul

Deux Grandes Dames with Melissa Errico & Isabelle Georges
10 & 13 Jul

Zachary James
15 Jul

Tonight: The Music of Leonard Bernstein with the Rob Barron Trio feat Emma Smith
17 Jul

brasseriezedel.com

Dorian: The Musical
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
4 Jul-10 Aug 2024
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

The Enormous Crocodile
REGENT'S PARK OPEN AIR THEATRE
Until 8 Jun 2024
openairtheatre.com

The Finellis: A New Musical Comedy
WONDERVILLE
3-16 Jun 2024
wondervilleuk.com

Frozen
THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE
Until 8 Sep 2024
frozenthemusical.co.uk

Fun at the Beach Romp-Bomp-A-Lomp!!
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
Until 22 Jun 2024
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Guys & Dolls
BRIDGE THEATRE
Until 4 January 2025
bridgetheatre.co.uk

Hadestown
LYRIC THEATRE
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
uk.hadestown.com

Hamilton
VICTORIA PALACE THEATRE
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
hamiltonmusical.com

Heathers The Musical
@SOHOPLACE
Until 6 July 2024
sohoplace.org

Hello, Dolly!
LONDON PALLADIUM
6 Jul-14 Sep
hellodollyldn.com

Jamie Muscato
CADOGAN HALL
21-22 Jul 2024
cadoganhall.com

Julie: The Musical
THE OTHER PALACE
12-30 Jun 2024
theotherpalace.co.uk

Last hurrah: Miss Adelaide stars at the Hot Box until 4 January 2025, whereupon NIcholas Hytner's immersive Guys & Dolls at the Bridge Theatre finally closes

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Brinkhoff Moegenburg

Kathy & Stella Solve a Murder!
AMBASSADORS THEATRE
Until 14 Sep 2024
kathyandstella.com

Kiss Me, Kate
BARBICAN THEATRE
4 Jun-14 Sep 2024
kissmekatethemusical.com

Lea Salonga: Stage, Screen & Everything in Between
THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE
24 Jun 2024
lwtheatre.co.uk

Les Misérables
SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
lesmis.com

The Lion King
LYCEUM THEATRE
Booking until 19 Oct 2024
thelionking.co.uk

London Tide
NATIONAL THEATRE
Until 22 Jun 2024
nationaltheatre.org.uk

Magic Mike Live
HIPPODROME CASINO
Booking until 29 Jun 2025
magicmikelondon.co.uk

Mamma Mia!
NOVELLO THEATRE
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
mamma-mia.com

Mamma Mia! The Party
THE 02
Booking until 15 Jun 2025
mammamiatheparty.co.uk

Marie Curie
CHARING CROSS THEATRE
1 Jun-28 July 2024
charingcrosstheatre.co.uk

Matilda The Musical
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 15 Dec 2024
matildathemusical.com

Mean Girls
SAVOY THEATRE
5 Jun 2024-16 Feb 2025
london.meangirlsmusical.com

MJ the Musical
PRINCE EDWARD THEATRE
Booking until 10 Dec 2024
london.mjthemusical.com

Moulin Rouge! The Musical
PICCADILLY THEATRE
Booking until 19 Oct 2024
moulinrougemusical.co.uk

Mrs Doubtfire The Musical
SHAFTESBURY THEATRE
Booking until 16 Feb 2025
mrsdoubtfiremusical.co.uk

Next to Normal
WYNDHAM'S THEATRE
18 Jun-21 Sep 2024
nexttonormal.com

Operation Mincemeat
FORTUNE THEATRE
Booking until 16 Nov 2024
operationmincemeat.com

Two Strangers: Sam Tutty and Dujonna Gift are superb in this two-hander rom-com, extended until 31 August 2024

Passing Strange
YOUNG VIC THEATRE
Until 6 Jul 2024
youngvic.org

The Phantom of the Opera
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
thephantomoftheopera.com

PIZZAEXPRESS LIVE

Sunday Afternoon at the Musicals
9 Jun & 7 Jul

What Would Julie Do?
21 Jul

pizzaexpresslive.com

Sister Act
DOMINION THEATRE
Until 30 Aug 2024
sisteractthemusical.co.uk

SIX
VAUDEVILLE THEATRE
Booking until 3 Nov 2024
sixthemusical.com

A Song of Songs
PARK THEATRE
Until 15 Jun 2024
parktheatre.co.uk

Standing at the Sky's Edge
GILLIAN LYNNE THEATRE
Booking until 3 Aug 2024
skysedgemusical.com

Starlight Express
TROUBADOUR WEMBLEY PARK THEATRE
8 Jun 2024-16 Feb 2025
starlightexpresslondon.com

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
ALDWYCH THEATRE
Booking until 14 Sep 2024
tinathemusical.com

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)
CRITERION THEATRE
Booking until 31 Aug 2024
twostrangersthemusical.com

Wicked
APOLLO VICTORIA THEATRE
Booking until 1 Jun 2025
wickedthemusical.co.uk

Your Lie in April
HAROLD PINTER THEATRE
28 Jun-21 Sep 2024
atgtickets.com

Touring: Major Shows

& Juliet
MANCHESTER OPERA HOUSE **8-20 Jul**
BLACKPOOL OPERA HOUSE **23-27 Jul**
andjulietthemusical.co.uk

101 Dalmatians
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London
22-29 Jun
THE ALEXANDRA, Birmingham **2-6 Jul**
NORWICH THEATRE ROYAL **9-13 Jul**
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury
16-20 Jul
LEICESTER CURVE **23-27 Jul**
101dalmatians.co.uk

Aladdin
MANCHESTER PALACE THEATRE
Until 7 Jul
BRISTOL HIPPODROME **10 Jul-11 Aug**
aladdinthemusical.co.uk

Bonnie & Clyde
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast
Until 1 Jun
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford **11-15 Jun**
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE **18-22 Jun**
EDINBURGH FESTIVAL THEATRE **2-6 Jul**
EVERYMAN THEATRE, Cheltenham
9-13 Jul
BORD GÁIS THEATRE, Dublin **16-20 Jul**
THEATRE ROYAL BRIGHTON **23-27 Jul**
bonnieandclydemusical.com

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
EDINBURGH PLAYHOUSE **Until 1 Jun**
THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE **4-8 Jun**
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE Aberdeen
11-15 Jun
CHURCHILL THEATRE, Bromley
25-30 Jun
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE **2-7 Jul**
ALHAMBRA THEATRE **9-14 Jul**
GRAND OPERA HOUSE BELFAST
23 Jul-3 Aug
chittyontour.com

A Chorus Line
LEICESTER CURVE **28 Jun-13 Jul**
THE LOWRY, Salford **23-27 Jul**
achoruslinetour.com

Come From Away
NEW THEATRE, Hull **4-8 Jun**
BORD GÁIS ENERGY THEATRE, Dublin
11-22 Jun
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast
25-29 Jun
comefromawaylondon.co.uk

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton
Until 1 Jun
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury
3-8 Jun
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE **10-15 Jun**
NEW THEATRE, Hull **17-22 Jun**
NORWICH THEATRE ROYAL **24-29 Jun**
everybodystalkingaboutjamie.co.uk

Grease
LIVERPOOL EMPIRE **Until 1 Jun**
THEATRE ROYAL NORWICH **3-8 Jun**
THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE **10-15 Jun**
KING'S THEATRE, Glasgow **17-22 Jun**
EDINBURGH PLAYHOUSE **25-29 Jun**
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen
2-6 Jul
THE ALEXANDRA, Birmingham **15-20 Jul**
HALL FOR CORNWALL, Truro **23-27 Jul**
greasemusical.co.uk

Hamilton
BRISTOL HIPPODROME **Until 22 Jun**
BIRMINGHAM HIPPODROME
25 Jun-31 Aug
hamiltonmusical.com

Here You Come Again: The New Dolly Parton Musical
LEEDS PLAYHOUSE **Until 8 Jun**
LEICESTER CURVE **11-15 Jun**
THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE **18-22 Jun**
CAMBRIDGE ARTS THEATRE **25-29 Jun**
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury
2-6 Jul
THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM
9-13 Jul
MALVERN THEATRES **16-20 Jul**
EDINBURGH PLAYHOUSE **23-27 Jul**
hereyoucomeagain.co.uk

King Julien, Marty, Alex, Melman and Gloria run amok in Madagascar The Musical, a riotous show touring across the UK, from Wolverhampton to Nottingham

Hairspray
MANCHESTER PALACE THEATRE
16-27 Jul
hairsprayuktour.com

Heathers
THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR
24-27 Jul
heathersthemusical.com

Jesus Christ Superstar
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking
3-8 Jun
SUNDERLAND EMPIRE 11-15 Jun
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury
17-22 Jun
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield 24-29 Jun
jesuschristsuperstar.com

Lea Salonga: Stage, Screen & Everything in Between
WOLVERHAMPTON GRAND THEATRE
21 Jun
THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE, London
24 Jun
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff
25 Jun
BRISTOL BEACON 26 Jun
NOTTINGHAM ROYAL CONCERT HALL
28 Jun
GLASSHEAD INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR MUSIC, Gateshead 29 Jun
EDINBURGH FESTIVAL THEATRE 30 Jun
BRIDGEWATER HALL, Manchester 1 Jul
cuffeandtaylor.com

Little Shop of Horrors
HULL TRUCK THEATRE Until 8 Jun
THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR 18-22 Jun
hulltruck.co.uk;
theatreroyalwindsor.co.uk

Madagascar The Musical
WOLVERHAMPTON GRAND THEATRE
Until 1 Jun
ORCHARD WEST, Dartford 6-9 Jun
CONGRESS THEATRE, Eastbourne
13-16 Jun
QUEEN'S THEATRE BARNSTAPLE
19-23 Jun
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff
27-30 Jun
THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE
10-13 Jul
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton
18-21 Jul
THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM
24-27 Jul
madagascarthemusical.co.uk

An Officer and a Gentleman The Musical
NEW THEATRE, Oxford Until 1 Jun
GRAND OPERA HOUSE YORK 4-8 Jun
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield 17-22 Jun
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton
25-29 Jun
officerandagentlemanthemusical.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
SUNDERLAND EMPIRE until 8 Jun
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast
10-15 Jun
CORK OPERA HOUSE 24-29 Jun
london.prettywomanthemusical.com/tour

Sister Act The Musical
BUXTON OPERA HOUSE Until 1 Jun
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton
10-15 Jun
STORYHOUSE, Chester 24-29 Jun
GRIMSBY AUDITORIUM 2-6 Jul
CONGRESS THEATRE, Eastbourne
8-13 Jul
BLACKPOOL WINTER GARDENS
15-20 Jul
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury
23-27 Jul
sisteractthemusical.co.uk

SIX
LEEDS GRAND THEATRE Until 1 Jun
EDINBURGH PLAYHOUSE 11-15 Jun
BIRMINGHAM HIPPODROME 18-22 Jun
NEW THEATRE, Oxford 25-29 Jun
SUNDERLAND EMPIRE 2-6 Jul
CHURCHILL THEATRE, Bromley
10-14 Jul
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton
16-20 Jul
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield
23 Jul-10 Aug
sixthemusical.com

Unfortunate: The Untold Story of Ursula the Sea Witch
PALACE THEATRE, Southend Until 1 Jun
EXETER NORTHCOTT THEATRE 4-8 Jun
GRAND OPERA HOUSE YORK 11-15 Jun
CHURCHILL THEATRE, Bromley
18-22 Jun
THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM
25-30 Jun
THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE 2-4 Jul
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton
6-7 Jul
WOLVERHAMPTON GRAND THEATRE
11-14 Jul
unfortunatemusical.com

Wicked
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton
Until 16 Jun
LIVERPOOL EMPIRE 20 Jun-14 Jul
BORD GÁIS ENERGY THEATRE, Dublin
23 Jul-14 Sep
wickedthemusical.co.uk

The Wizard of Oz
BORD GÁIS ENERGY THEATRE, Dublin
Until 8 Jun
BIRMINGHAM HIPPODROME 11-16 Jun
KING'S THEATRE, Glasgow 2-7 Jul
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen
9-13 Jul
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE 16-21 Jul
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff
23-28 Jul
uktour.wizardofozmusical.com

Major Regional Theatres

The Alexandra, Birmingham
101 Dalmatians
2-6 Jun
Grease
15-20 Jul
atgtickets.com

Birmingham Hippodrome
Come From Away
Until 1 Jun
The Wizard of Oz
11-16 Jun
SIX
18-22 Jun
Hamilton
25 Jun-11 Aug
birminghamhippodrome.com

Bristol Hippodrome
Hamilton
Until 22 Jun
Aladdin
10 Jul-11 Aug
atgtickets.com

Chichester Festival Theatre
Oliver!
8 Jul-7 Sep
cft.org.uk

Edinburgh Playhouse
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
Until 1 Jun
SIX
11-15 Jun

PHOTOGRAPHY: Phil Tragen / Marc Brenner

Grease is the word: Nikolai Foster's colourful touring production stops off in Liverpool, Norwich, Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Cornwall

Grease
25-29 Jun
Here You Come Again:
The New Dolly Parton Musical
23-27 Jul
atgtickets.com

Grand Opera House, Belfast
Bonnie & Clyde
Until 1 Jun
Pretty Woman
10-15 Jun
Come From Away
25-29 Jun
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
23 Jul-3 Aug
goh.co.uk

Grand Opera House, York
An Officer and a Gentleman
4-8 Jun
Unfortunate: The Untold Story of
Ursula the Sea Witch
11-15 Jun
atgtickets.com

Kilworth House Theatre, Leicestershire
Singin' in the Rain
18 Jun-28 Jul
kilworthhouse.co.uk

King's Theatre, Glasgow
Grease
17-22 Jun
The Wizard of Oz
2-7 Jul
atgtickets.com

Leeds Playhouse
My Fair Lady
Until 29 Jun
leedsplayhouse.org.uk

Leicester Curve
Here You Come Again:
The New Dolly Parton Musical
11-15 Jun
A Chorus Line
28 Jun-13 Jul
101 Dalmatians
23-27 Jul
curveonline.co.uk

Liverpool Empire
Grease
Until 1 Jun
Wicked
20 Jun-14 Jul
An Officer and a Gentleman
22-27 Jul
atgtickets.com

The Lowry, Salford
Showstopper! The Improvised Musical
28-29 Jun
A Chorus Line
23-27 Jul
thelowry.com

Manchester Palace Theatre
Aladdin
Until 7 Jul
Hairspray
16-27 Jul
atgtickets.com

Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
3-8 Jun
Jesus Christ Superstar
17-22 Jun
Here You Come Again:
The New Dolly Parton Musical
2-6 Jul
An Officer and a Gentleman
8-13 Jul
Sister Act
23-27 Jul
marlowetheatre.com

Mayflower Theatre, Southampton
Wicked
Until 16 Jun
An Officer and a Gentleman
25-29 Jun
Unfortunate: The Untold Story of
Ursula the Sea Witch
6-7 Jul
SIX
16-20 Jul
Pretty Woman
22-27 Jul
mayflower.org.uk

Milton Keynes Theatre
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
10-15 Jun
Bonnie & Clyde
18-22 Jun
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
2-7 Jul
The Wizard of Oz
16-21 Jul
atgtickets.com

New Theatre, Oxford
An Officer and a Gentleman
Until 1 Jun
SIX
25-29 Jun
atgtickets.com

Pitlochry Festival Theatre
Footloose
Until 26 Sep
Beautiful: The Carole King Musical
7 Jun-28 Sep
pitlochryfestivaltheatre.com

Royal & Derngate, Northampton
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
Until 1 Jun
Sister Act
10-15 Jun
Madagascar
18-21 Jul
royalandderngate.co.uk

Sheffield Lyceum
An Officer and a Gentleman
17-22 Jun
Jesus Christ Superstar
24-29 Jun
Come From Away
9-20 Jul
SIX
23 Jul-10 Aug
sheffieldtheatres.co.uk

Theatre Royal Newcastle
Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
4-8 Jun
Grease
10-15 Jun
Here You Come Again: The New Dolly
Parton Musical
18-22 Jun
Unfortunate: The Untold Story of Ursula
the Sea Witch
2-4 Jul
Madagascar
10-13 Jul
theatreroyal.co.uk

Norwich Theatre Royal
Grease
3-8 Jun
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
24-29 Jun
101 Dalmatians
9-13 Jul
norwichtheatre.org

Theatre Royal Nottingham
Unfortunate: The Untold Story of
Ursula the Sea Witch
25-29 Jun
Lea Salonga: Stage, Screen
& Everything In Between
28 Jun
Here You Come Again:
The New Dolly Parton Musical
9-13 Jul
Madagascar
24-27 Jul
trch.co.uk

Theatre Royal Plymouth
The Devil Wears Prada
6 Jul-17 Aug
theatreroyal.com

Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff
Lea Salonga: Stage, Screen
& Everything in Between
25 Jun
The Wizard of Oz
23-28 Jul
wmc.org.uk

Watermill Theatre, Newbury
Barnum
2 Jul-8 Sep
watermill.org.uk

US
Broadway

& Juliet
STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 15 Sep 2024
andjulietbroadway.com

Aladdin
NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE
Booking until 11 Aug 2024
aladdinthemusical.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
WINTER GARDEN THEATRE
Booking until 1 Dec 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com/newyork

A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical
BROADHURST THEATRE
Until 30 Jun 2024
abeautifulnoisethemusical.com

NORDOFF & ROBBINS
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The Book of Mormon
EUGENE O'NEILL THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
bookofmormonbroadway.com

Chicago
AMBASSADOR THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
chicagothemusical.com

Cabaret
AUGUST WILSON THEATRE
(KIT KAT CLUB)
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
kitkat.club/cabaret-broadway

Hadestown
WALTER KERR THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
hadestown.com

Hamilton
RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE
Booking until 29 Mar 2025
hamiltonmusical.com

The Heart of Rock and Roll
JAMES EARL JONES THEATRE
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
heartofrocknrollbway.com

How to Dance in Ohio
BELASCO THEATRE
Until 16 Jun 2024
howtodanceinohiomusical.com

The Lion King
MINSKOFF THEATRE
Booking until 11 Aug 2024
lionking.com

Merrily We Roll Along
HUDSON THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jul 2024
merrilyonbroadway.com

MJ the Musical
NEIL SIMON THEATRE
Booking until 8 Sep 2024
mjthemusical.com

Moulin Rouge!
AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
moulinrougemusical.com

The Notebook: The Musical
SCHOENFELD THEATRE
Booking until 24 Nov 2024
notebookmusical.com

The Outsiders
JACOBS THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
outsidersmusical.com

SIX
BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE
Booking until 8 Sep 2024
sixonbroadway.com

Spamalot
ST JAMES THEATRE
Booking until 28 Jul 2024
stjamestheatrenyc.com

Suffs The Musical
MUSIC BOX THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
suffsmusical.com

The Who's Tommy
NEDERLANDER THEATRE
Booking until 24 Nov 2024
tommythemusical.com

Water for Elephants
IMPERIAL THEATRE
Booking until 8 Sep 2024
waterforelephantsthemusical.com

Wicked
GERSHWIN THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
wickedthemusical.com

The Wiz
MARQUIS THEATRE
Booking until 18 Aug 2024
wizmusical.com

Off Broadway

Friends! The Musical Parody
THEATRE CENTRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
theatrercenter.com

Little Shop of Horrors
WESTSIDE THEATRE
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
littleshopnyc.com

The Office! A Musical Parody
THE THEATER CENTRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
theofficeoffbroadway.com

A Sign of the Times
NEW WORLD STAGES
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
asignofthetimes.com

Singfield! A Musical About Nothing!
THEATER 555
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
theatrercenter.com

Titanique: Une Parodie Musicale
DARYL ROTH THEATRE
Booking until 29 Sep 2024
titaniquemusical.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Chad Davis Kraus

Titanique: Une Parodie Musicale, featuring the songs of Céline Dion, is booking at the Daryl Roth until September

International

Aladdin
TEATRO COLISEUM, Madrid
Booking until 23 Jun 2024
stage.es/musicales/Aladdin

Aladdin
DENTSU SHIKI THEATRE UMI, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Disney's Frozen
THEATRE AN DER ELBE, Hamburg
Booking until 31 Aug 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Disney's Frozen
JR EAST SHIKI THEATER HARU, Tokyo
Booking until 29 Sep 2024
shiki.jp

Disney's Hercules
STAGE THEATER NEUE FLORA, Hamburg
Booking until 22 Dec 2024
stage-entertainment.de

The Lion King
THÉÂTRE MOGADOR, Paris
Booking until 14 July 2024
theatremogador.com

The Lion King
THEATER IM HAFEN, Hamburg
Booking until 22 Dec 2024
stage-entertainment.de

The Lion King
THEATRO LOPE DE VEGA, Madrid
Booking until 3 Dec 2024
stage.es/musicales/el-rey-leon

Mamma Mia!
RIALTO THEATER, Madrid
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
mammamiaelmusical.es

Les Misérables
PRINCESS OF WALES THEATRE, Toronto
Booking until 1 Jun 2024
mirvish.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
TEATRO EDP GRAN VIA, Madrid
Booking until 26 Sep 2024
prettywomanelmusical.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
BEATRIX THEATRE, Utrecht
Booking until 30 Dec 2024
stage-entertainment.nl

Starlight Express
STARLIGHT EXPRESS THEATRE, Bochum
Booking until 31 Dec 2024
starlight-express.de

Sunset Boulevard
PRINCESS THEATRE, Melbourne
Until 11 August
sunsetmusical.com.au

Tanz der Vampire
STAGE OPERETTENHAUS, Hamburg
Booking until 15 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tarzan
STAGE PALLADIUM THEATRE, Stuttgart
Booking until 22 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
STAGE APOLLO THEATRE, Stuttgart
Booking until 14 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

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Welcome to the rock: Come From Away offers multiple access performances, including BSL and audio described

PHOTOGRAPHY: Craig Sugden

Access and relaxed performances (UK)

Aladdin
Manchester Palace Theatre
Captioned: **21 Jun, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **26 Jun, 7:30pm**
BSL: **3 Jul, 7:30pm**
Bristol Hippodrome
BSL: **24 Jul, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **31 Jul, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **2 Aug, 7:30pm**
Bradford Alhambra Theatre
BSL: **22 Aug, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **28 Aug, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **30 Aug, 7:30pm**
Southampton Mayflower Theatre
Audio described: **18 Sep, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **20 Sep, 7:30pm**
BSL: **26 Sep, 7:30pm**
Birmingham Hippodrome
Audio described: **17 Oct, 7:30pm**
BSL: **18 Oct, 7:30pm**
Relaxed performance: **23 Oct, 1pm**
Captioned: **24 Oct, 7:30pm**
Glasgow Theatre Royal
Audio described: **20 Nov, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **22 Nov, 7:30pm**
BSL: **27 Nov, 7:30pm**

Bonnie & Clyde
Bradford Alhambra Theatre
BSL: **13 Jun, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **15 Jun, 2:30pm**
Festival Theatre, Edinburgh
Captioned: **4 Jul, 7:30pm**
Audio described/BSL: **6 Jul, 2:30pm**
Birmingham Hippodrome
BSL: **4 Sep, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **5 Sep, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **7 Sep, 2:30pm**
King's Head Theatre, Portsmouth
BSL: **12 Sep, 2:30pm**
Theatre Royal, Newcastle
Captioned: **5 Oct, 2:30pm**
Lyceum, Sheffield
BSL/audio described: **10 Oct, 7:45pm**
Captioned: **12 Oct, 3:00pm**
Royal & Derngate, Northampton
Audio Described: **23 Oct, 7:30pm**
BSL: **24 Oct, 7:30pm**

A Chorus Line
Leicester Curve
BSL: **9 Jul, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **10 Jul, 2:15pm; 7:30pm**
Audio described: **11 Jul, 7:30pm**
Relaxed: **13 Jul, 2:15pm**
The Lowry, Salford
Audio described/BSL: **27 Jul, 2pm**
Sadler's Wells, London
Captioned: **10 Aug, 2:30pm**
Audio described: **17 Aug, 2:30pm**
BSL: **24 Aug 2:30pm**
Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury
Audio described: **6 Sep, 7:30pm**
Birmingham Hippodrome
BSL: **11 Sep, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **12 Sep, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **14 Sep, 2:30pm**
Festival Theatre, Edinburgh
Captioned: **26 Sep, 7:30pm**
Audio described/BSL: **27 Sep, 2:30pm**

Come From Away
New Theatre, Hull
Audio described: **5 Jun, 7:30pm**
BSL: **6 Jun, 7:30pm**
Grand Opera House, Belfast
Captioned: **27 Jun, 8pm**
Regent Theatre, Ipswich
BSL: **6 Jul, 7:30pm**
Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield
Audio described/BSL: **18 Jul, 7:45pm**
Captioned: **20 Jul, 3pm**
Venue Cymru, Llandudno
Audio described/BSL: **1 Aug, 7:30pm**
Theatre Royal, Newcastle
BSL: **8 Aug, 7:30pm**
Audio described/captioned: **10 Aug, 2:30pm**
Bristol Hippodrome
BSL/audio described: **21 Aug, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **28 Aug, 7:30pm**
His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen
BSL: **12 Sep, 7:30pm**
Audio described/captioned: **14 Sep, 2:30pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
BSL: **18 Sep, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **19 Sep, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **20 Sep, 7:30pm**
King's Theatre, Glasgow
Captioned: **25 Sep, 7:30pm**
BSL/audio described: **26 Sep, 7:30pm**
Theatre Royal Nottingham
Audio described: **3 Oct, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **4 Oct, 7:30pm**
BSL: **5 Oct, 2:30pm**
New Theatre, Wimbledon
BSL/audio described: **9 Oct, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **10 Oct, 7:30pm**
Norwich Theatre Royal
Captioned: **17 Oct, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **25 Oct, 7:30pm**

The Enormous Crocodile
Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, London
BSL: **5 Jun, 10:15am**
Audio described: **7 Jun, 1:45pm**

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury
BSL: **8 Jun, 2:30pm**

Frozen
Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London (GalaPro app available for all performances)

Grease
Liverpool Empire
Captioned: **1 Jun, 2:30pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
Audio described: **27 Jun, 7:30pm**
The Alexandra, Birmingham
BSL: **17 Jul, 7:30pm**

Hamilton
Victoria Palace Theatre, London (GalaPro app available for all performances)

Hello, Dolly!
London Palladium
Captioned: **5 Sep, 7:30pm**
BSL: **12 Sep, 7:30pm**

Jesus Christ Superstar
Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield
Audio described & BSL **27 Jun, 7:30pm**
Captioned **29 June, 3pm**

Kathy & Stella Solve a Murder!
Ambassadors Theatre, London
BSL: **9 Jul, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **17 Jul, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **23 Jul, 7:30pm**

Kiss Me, Kate
Barbican Theatre, London
Audio described: **17 Jul, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **24 Jul, 7:30pm; 17 Aug, 2:30pm**

The Lion King
Lyceum Theatre, London
BSL/captioned/relaxed: **30 Jun, 1:30pm**

London Tide
National Theatre, London
Captioned: **14 Jun, 7pm**
Audio described: **20 Jun, 7pm**

Madagascar The Musical
Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff
Relaxed: **28 Jun, 11am**
Theatre Royal, Newcastle
BSL: **11 July, 6:30pm**
Relaxed: **12 July, 10:30am**
Royal & Derngate, Northampton
BSL: **18 July, 6pm**
Audio described: **20 July, 2pm**

Matilda
Cambridge Theatre, London
Audio described: **16 Jun, 3pm; 2 Oct, 2pm**
Autism friendly/relaxed: **16 Jun, 3pm**
Captioned: **16 Jun, 3pm; 25 Sep, 2pm; 23 Nov 2:30pm**
Chilled: **3 Nov, 3pm**

MJ the Musical
Prince Edward Theatre, London
Captioned: **11 Jun, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **18 Jun, 7:30pm**

Moulin Rouge!
Piccadilly Theatre, London
Audio described: **3 Sep, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **10 Sep, 7:30pm**
BSL: **17 Sep, 7:30pm**

An Officer and a Gentleman
Grand Opera House, York
Audio described: **8 Jun, 2:30pm**

Operation Mincemeat
Fortune Theatre, London
Relaxed: **2 Sep, 7:30pm**

Passing Strange
Young Vic, London
Captioned: **5 Jun, 2:30pm; 13 Jun, 7:30pm**
Relaxed: **8 Jun, 2:30pm; 27 Jun, 7:30pm**
Sensory adapted: **18 Jun, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **22 Jun, 2:30pm; 25 Jun, 7:30pm**

Pretty Woman The Musical
The Alexandra, Birmingham
BSL: **24 Aug, 2:30pm**

Sister Act
Dominion Theatre, London
Captioned: **25 Jun, 7:30pm**
Relaxed: **6 Jul, 6:30pm**

SIX
Vaudeville Theatre, London
BSL: **6 July, 4pm**
Audio described: **7 July, 3pm**
Captioned: **13 July, 4pm**
Sunderland Empire
Audio described: **4 Jun, 8pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
BSL: **12 Jun, 5pm**
Audio described: **13 Jun, 8pm**
Captioned: **14 Jun, 5pm**
New Theatre, Oxford
BSL: **24 Jun, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **26 Jun, 8pm**

Standing at the Sky's Edge
Gillian Lynne Theatre, London
BSL: **22 Jun, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **13 Jul, 2:30pm**

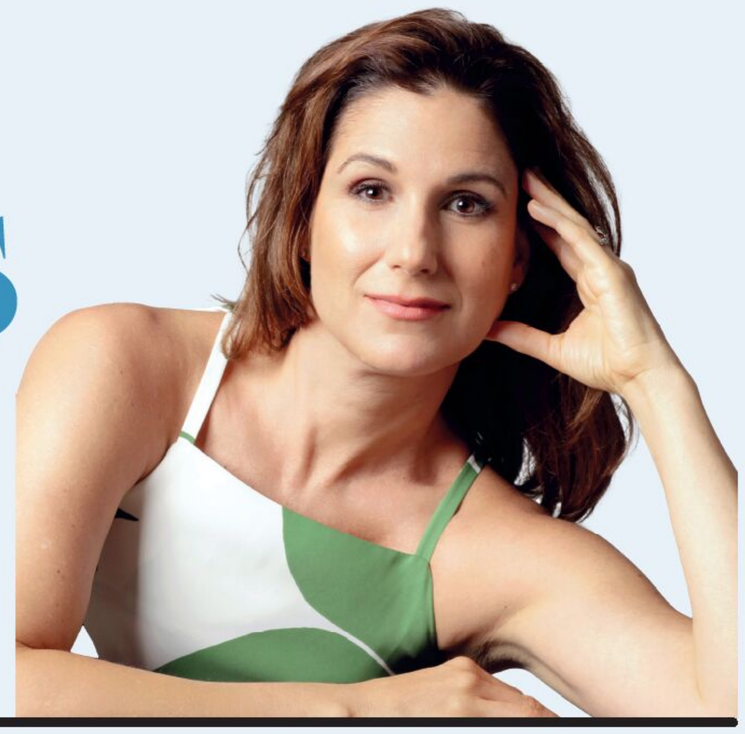
Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)
Criterion Theatre, London
BSL: **2 Jun, 3pm**
Captioned: **15 Jun, 2:30pm**

Wicked
Apollo Victoria Theatre, London
Audio Described: **20 Oct, 2:30pm**

The Wizard of Oz
King's Theatre, Glasgow
Audio described: **6 Jul, 2:30pm**
Sunderland Empire
Audio described/captioned: **8 August, 7:30pm**

Our listings cover the period between 30 May and 26 July 2024 (and until the autumn for access listings); all information correct at the time of going to press

My Musicals



Stephanie J Block, now starring in Kiss Me, Kate at the Barbican, on shaping the roles of Elphaba and Cher, her Sondheim aspirations, and the joy of the English tea break

I was born and raised in Southern California. I was seven or eight when one of the nuns at my school suggested I lead the congregation at my first communion. I had this big, brassy voice – people called me 'The Little Ethel Merman' but I didn't know who that was!

At 11, I started training privately with my vocal coach, Jill Goodsell, who remains my mentor today. By then, I knew this wasn't going to be a fleeting passion – it was going to be my life. I was one of those young spirits that can't be contained – there was no fear, and the possibilities were endless.

I auditioned for Fullerton Civic Light Opera half a dozen times and didn't get in. But when I was 12, I got a very small part in *Annie Get Your Gun* – and I discovered that this was my community. It was less about the role, and more about being in the ecosphere of these incredible, impassioned actors.

My goal was to get to Broadway. So, being in Southern California, I worked in dinner theatre and at Disneyland, where I was the first Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* – and that got me to New York for the first time. I was in the final callback for Belle in the Broadway production, and while I was there I got to see *Crazy for You*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *The Who's Tommy* – three wildly different shows, with different methods of storytelling. And that's when I thought: 'I have to be in this city to build new pieces of Musical Theatre from the ground up.'

For the next two years, I said yes to every job so that I could save money and gather enough points to become an Equity member. I moved to New York at the age of 22: I had an agent, my union card, a resumé… And then within six months, I realised my spirit wasn't ready. I was intimidated by the city, by my competition, and I started to lose my sense of self. So I made the humbling decision to move back to California. For the next couple of years I kind of plateaued, though I managed to pay my bills through working in Musical Theatre.

In 2000, I got a phone call from Stephen Schwartz. He was developing a new musical with Universal Pictures called *Wicked*, and because I'd worked so many jobs in Southern California, my name came up. For the next two years, we did presentations and table readings, until finally we did a two-week workshop on the studio lot of Universal with Kristin Chenoweth playing Glinda and I thought, 'This will take me to Broadway.'

But then Stephen called and told me the role wasn't mine. Idina [Menzel] knew the ropes, she'd been Tony-nominated. I could be the cover, but not Elphaba. I had completely fallen in love with her, and I didn't know if I could find the grace to watch this role being translated by another actress. But I'm a very prayerful person and I thought: 'I have to put my ego aside.' Before Broadway, we went to San Francisco, and I was able to play Elphaba one time. Stephen was there. I'd already booked another job – I was going to play Liza Minnelli on Broadway, opposite Hugh Jackman, in *The Boy from Oz* (two Oz's for the price of one!). And Stephen said: 'Go ahead – but know that this role will be yours when you're done.'

> **Stephen [Schwartz] told me the role of Elphaba wasn't mine. I knew I had to put my ego aside**

I chose to do it on tour. I wanted to get back into the rehearsal room and build an Elphaba of my own. In Elphaba, strength meets vulnerability. She's an underdog who accepts who she is and uses that for the greater good. I met my husband, Sebastian Arcelus, through that tour. I like to say: 'Idina got the Tony, but I got the Sebastian!'

After saying yes to Liza, I said yes to Cher – and I can tell you, that's the end of me playing living, breathing characters! When I build a character, I like to start internally – but when you're playing an icon, you have to perfect their walk, their gestures, before you can start making them a three-dimensional person. I'd already said no to *The Cher Show* [for which she won a Tony] several times, but then the director Jason Moore took me to dinner and explained the construct to me: that as the older Cher, 'Star', I'd be sharing the story with two other Chers (we called it 'Cherapy'!). That's what sold me on it.

Playing the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods* on tour last year, with my husband as the Baker, was a deeply emotional experience for us both. My husband says that we may not have known Sondheim in the way we wanted – I never got to be in a rehearsal room with him – but we know ourselves better because of him. I'd love to play Mama Rose and Mrs Lovett. I pray there'll be more Sondheim in my future.

We don't have to sell anyone on the beauty and legitimacy of *Kiss Me, Kate*. People are familiar with Cole Porter's score, so it's a playfield for us to create our own version. There's been a lot of freedom, and that's the real beauty of being a Musical Theatre artist. Plus, like Elphaba, there's a combination of vulnerability and strength to my Lilli/Kate.

Being in London, with all its history, and in a rehearsal space with natural light (even though the sun only comes out once every seven days!) only elevates the work we're doing. And we have tea breaks with biscuits – are you kidding me?! The whole process is just lovely. M

As told to Sarah Kirkup

Kiss Me, Kate plays at the Barbican Theatre, London, from 4 June to 14 September – visit kissmekatemusical.com; Block and Marylee Fairbanks's podcast is at stagespodcast.net

My must-have recording

ONCE ON THIS ISLAND
ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING (1990)
MASTERWORKS BROADWAY

One recording I will always turn to is *Into the Woods*. But *Once On This Island* by Ahrens and Flaherty is also important to me. It doesn't matter how I'm feeling, this recording always pulls me up into a mood that makes me want to dance and be productive – or be in tears! You can never not be in motion listing to this recording.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Christopher Boudewyns

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AIN'T IT GOOD
ALICE FEARN
(Children of Eden)

ON WINGS OF A SWAN
PETER JÖBACK
(My Fairy Tale)

COLOURS OF THE WIND
SAMANTHA BARKS
(Pocahontas)

LET THERE BE
JOHN OWEN-JONES
(Children of Eden)

THE WIZARD AND I
RACHEL TUCKER
(Wicked)

ON THE WILLOWS
JORDAN LUKE GAGE & ROB HOUCHEN
(Godspell)

MEADOWLARK
LOUISE DEARMAN
(The Baker's Wife)

DELIVER US
HIBA ELCHIKHE
(The Prince of Egypt)

BEAUTIFUL CITY
OLIVER TOMPSETT
(Godspell)

FORGIVENESS EMBRACE
JAMIE LAMBERT
(Uncharted Territory)

LOST IN THE WILDERNESS
BILLY LUKE NEVERS
(Children of Eden)

OH, BLESS THE LORD MY SOUL
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